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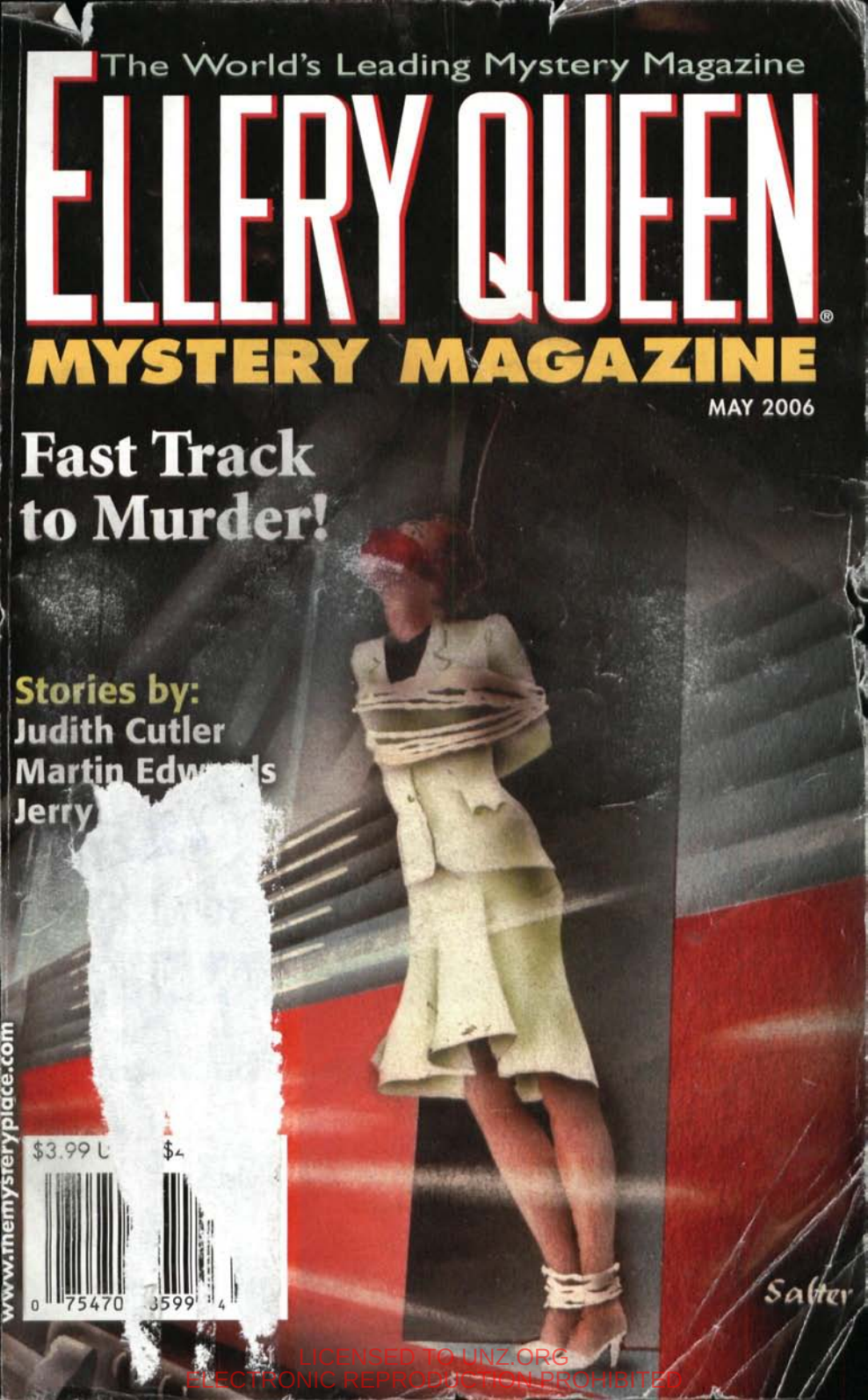

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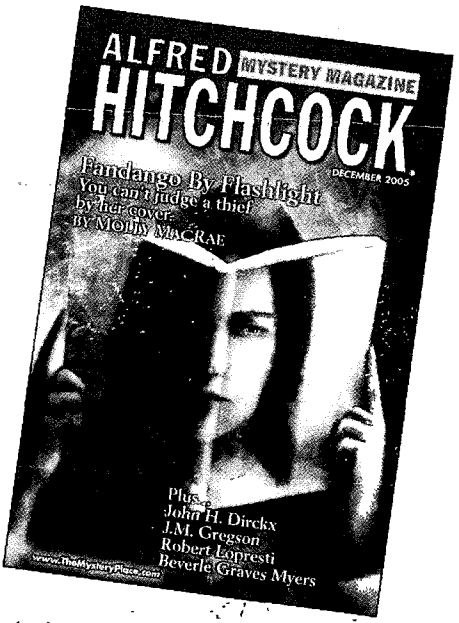

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SHAPING THE ENDS

by Judith Cutler

If only Hamlet had been tried for Polonius's death the truth would have come out.

Why was it my destiny ever to be involved? God knows it was not my choice, at any point. I was unprepared for any of it. I had always been content with my lot, a serving woman, waiting on Her Majesty. I would mend her clothes, dress her hair, and sleep on my pallet across the door to her apartment to keep her safe and preserve her reputation. There were times, of course, when I heard the measured gait of His Majesty approaching, and knew to make myself scarce. Those times came less and less often once His Majesty's younger brother Claudius returned, when it seemed to me the whole court spent its time carousing. After our seemly, plain suppers, the rich food and Rhenish disagreed with His Majesty, and he came hardly ever to Her Majesty's chamber. I thought at first it was she who went to his, she came reeling back to her boudoir so late, but I have since had cause to change my mind.

To my astonishment, the celebrations changed the Lord Chamberlain. I'd always thought of him as a prosy old fool, given to

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smutty jokes in the presence of us underlings, as if bestowing largesse. Imagine my amazement when he went further than occasionally fondling my bum or squeezing my breasts—much further. I found myself having to fight him off in the dark corners on the turns of stairs. When I complained to the queen that this man old enough to be my father had tried to ravish me, she blushed and with downcast eyes admitted that he was so taken with me he wished to make me his mistress.

Down in Jutland we don't become mistresses. We marry or we stay maids. And so I told Her Majesty.

She raised an eyebrow. "But his children? They are both—difficult, Maria."

I nodded. I could hardly do otherwise. Lacking a mother so long, they had become unruly, wayward. He, the older by some years, was inclined to give himself airs, as if he were the head of the house. He'd been sent to Paris, to acquire a little polish and less learning, as his father was wont to say. He was certainly a hothead who would brook no opposition, and I was glad he spent so much time abroad. His sister missed him grievously, and used to pen long, effusive letters in response to his, as if he were her absent betrothed. Then she found other objects for her unruly affections. For a week she swooned for the English ambassador, and when he was recalled a few weeks later, wept over his miniature painted by Master Hilliard. Then it was for the captain of the guard she sighed, then a player from a group of itinerant actors. I said it was because she was young, with too much time on her hands. My advice was that she should fill her hours with plain sewing and visiting the sick, but her father spoilt her yet. Goodness knows whom she would next turn her lovelorn eyes upon. The more trouble for him, said I.

"It seems to me that even if it's a bedding on the wrong side of the blanket, madam, I'll offend his children. In a small place like this, everyone knows everyone else's business." There was much of her business I rather more than suspected—recently concerning the lord Claudius. "Mistress or wife," I continued, "I won't please them. And if I can't be his wife, you must make him keep those pickers and stealers to himself. I'll not tolerate the tedious old

Judith Cutler is the author of two acclaimed series of crime novels set in Birmingham, England. One stars amateur sleuth Sophie Rivers, the other Inspector Kate Power (who lives up to her name). A third protagonist will soon join these two successful Cutler creations; watch for painter and decorator turned amateur detective Caffy Tyler. Ms. Cutler's most recent novel, *Scar Tissue*, was published by Allison & Busby in 2004. †

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fool's antics any longer."

"It's not to be a love match then," the queen sighed, as gusty with emotion as young Ophelia. At her time of life, too. Thank goodness she was past the age to worry whether paddling palms with the king's brother would have dire consequences. Or perhaps—just in case—that was why every so often she'd lure the king back to her boudoir, so he could have no doubts over any love child. "But it would be sensible, Maria—it's better to be a rich widow than a poor spinster."

So wed we did, but without the pomp I'd have liked. A very hole-in-corner affair it was, with the pastor mumbling away to himself and my new lord giving a homily as long as any preacher could wish. Then, for all the premarital fumblings, my maidenhead was as intact at the end of our wedding night as at the beginning. Of course, he was not a young man, and there was wine aplenty: However much it provokes the desire, they say, it always takes away the performance. But not the need for the pisspot under the bed. Was there ever such a man for a weak bladder? Faugh! And such stinking breath, too.

What I certainly did not expect was my instant despatch to my lord's country estate. There were affairs he wished me to oversee, he told me, going into much precise and tedious detail. Indeed I judiciously applied my spur to my steed, all the while pretending I was trying hard to control it and attend to his instructions.

Lord Chamberlain the old man might be, and almost running the country, but he had no more idea of how to run a farm than the crown prince would have of swimming the Skagerrack. It must have taken me six or eight weeks to instill some basic principles of domestic economy into the housekeeper, while my new stepson would have been better employed, despite his French silks and clever words, learning to run the farm.

One day all the church bells tolled, one by one, in every hamlet and village in the district. Were we at war? Giving strict instructions that all our treasures were to be sealed and buried deep in the cellar, I summoned my horse and rode home.

To find chaos.

The King, the good old King Hamlet, had died. There was so much grieving and despair it took me a few hours to discover that he had died, not as befitted a great man like him, heroically on the battlefield, but stung by a bee in his orchard where he was having a nap in the sun. I wept with the others. But there must be a new king. With great gusto I set the staff about spring-cleaning young Hamlet's room. It might have been fit for a prince before: Now it was fit for the king he was about to become. Flushed with my endeavours, it took me a few hours to realise that no one else talked of expecting him any moment. No one spoke of his corona-

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tion. They spoke of something else. It wasn't one rat I smelt, more a whole cellar full, as I cornered my lord that night.

"The queen to remarry!" I squeaked. "Whom, my lord?"

"The new king," he said, trying to avoid my eye.

"The queen can't marry Lord Hamlet! Even the worst heathen wouldn't suggest that!"

"Go to, go to. The queen marries my lord Claudius—"

"How can he be king? When the old king's son lives? And is," I added, "a good man, very like his father—kind to the poor, never giving himself airs."

"A young man," my apology for a husband muttered. "Inexperienced."

"A man of near thirty! And a student at Wittenberg, no less. What he doesn't know about kingship he'll soon learn. As for that Claudius," I continued, "the man's a rider, a lecher, a libertine, the owner of no one good quality—"

"A king. Our king. And not inclined to favour fishwives," my lord said tartly.

Our marriage was not consummated that night, either.

Within less than no time, as the newly arrived young Hamlet observed, Their Majesties were man and wife—such a hugger-mugger affair it was, too. Almost as quiet as mine. And no wedding journey to compensate. It seemed that the Norwegians had the measure of King Claudius and were planning an invasion, so he made it his business—oh no, not to ride out as King Hamlet would have done, and deal swiftly and surely with the matter, but to send a pair of underlings with a message. My husband and his newly returned hothead of a son almost came to blows over the decision. It certainly wasn't how Laertes felt a king should behave.

As for young Hamlet, you'd have thought all his philosophy would have taught him how to deal with the situation. In his place I would have disobeyed the king's wish that he stay at court and forthwith returned to university where he'd have been happy. If I'd stayed, it would have been to slit the usurper's throat in the church. But he merely sat in a corner and moped, making odd utterances no one understood. He managed but one sensible thing. Despite the winter weather, despite what should have been a year of mourning, the entire court was supposed to wear bright summer garb. Only he had the sense to swathe himself in his thickest clothes, complete with scarf and cloak. I would slip into his hands sweetmeats I had about me, just as when he was a boy: He would always favour me with a kind word, and sometimes a smile that lit his whole face. Often he seemed about to confide in me, but on cue up would come my husband, so promptly I'd swear he'd been listening.

At last Hamlet seemed to turn a corner, and became downright coltish. Perhaps it was his newfound love. He and Ophelia seemed

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well on the way to consoling each other, with some encouragement from both me and his mother, I have to say. But both blew hot and cold: The more he pursued, the more she skittered away, and when she turned up the heat, you couldn't see him for dust. A good box about the ears, that's what they both needed, and so I told Polonius.

"Can't you see it's for the best?" he whispered, looking about all the while as if the very dust motes might spy on him. "If he can't bed her till he's wed her, the good king and queen, fearing he'll go mad for love, will grant their consent and then I'm made for life, Maria. You and I," he added, somewhat as an afterthought.

"If you ask me, he's so many cares a silly girl playing fast and loose with his emotions can only be bad for him," I said. "His father dies, he comes bustling home expecting a coronation—his own, my lord—and what does he find? What he should, his mother in widow's weeds, preparing for a dowager's life in a convent? His uncle on his knees before him, swearing due allegiance to his new liege lord? No! He finds his throne usurped, his mother open-legged for a man not worth the snap of her fingers!" I might have added that, king's brother or not, Claudius's behaviour was far from regal: His hands were always trying to find their way into serving maids' plackets or tugging their bodices till their nipples peeped out. Fine manners in a newlywed.

"Hush. Prithee, wife, hush."

"And what are you planning, Polonius? You play your cards so close to your chest I sometimes think you can't see them yourself!"

He went off huffing and puffing. I was left to consider a new addition to our court, one of Prince Hamlet's fellow students. Horatio. Such a lovely pair of legs he had on him. Though he said little, what he did was always to the point—and he had the sweetest turn of phrase. I began to regret my overhasty marriage: A woman might expect apter treatment from this young man. But in time I began to suspect that he was not, as one might say, a marrying sort. Certainly he was as tender to the melancholy prince as a lover would be.

Not so the next arrivals at court, as nasty a pair as you'd come across in a week's work. More students. But though they would merrily chip and chop their logic with young Hamlet, they took back his every word to either my lord or King Claudius.

At last I could bear it no longer, and happened to find my way onto the battlements at the same time as Hamlet. At the sound of my footsteps he wheeled round in what looked like terror.

"It's only I. Maria," I said. "Come to blow a few cobwebs away."

We agreed that the weather was cold despite the bright sun, the wind coming from the northwest, and joked about the shape of the clouds. To my surprise, he scribbled in his tablets when I said one looked like a weasel.

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"And talking of weasels," I pursued, "there are those about the castle who claim to be your friends but who shouldn't be trusted any more than ferrets in a sack. Not Horatio, my lord. The other pair. Rosenstern and Guildenthing. Whatever they call themselves." I leaned closer. God, his doublet and hose stank. Waving my hand before my nose, I said, "You were once so well turned-out, Your Highness—the pattern card, the very mirror of fashion. And now a beggar would spurn this doublet. As for your hose—!"

He touched his nose too, but with the sort of tap that told me he had a secret. "There is a reason for all this. And the beard. And the lurking in corners. Trust me," he said.

"Trust! I don't know anyone else I'd trust in this place. Well, Horatio, I suppose. But no one else. No one at all."

"No one? Surely Ophelia—!"

"—would—I have to be frank—do anything her father bid her." Only that morning, as we were breaking our fast, I had heard him whispering to the king something about privately loosing her to Hamlet. *Loosing*—as if she were a mare to be tupped. "And he seems to be—nay, *is*—like this with Claudius." I crossed my fingers. "Beg pardon—*King* Claudius. Why don't you do something, my lord?"

Then I realised why rumours of his madness were no longer whispered, but spoken openly.

Out of the blue, he asked, "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Without thinking, I crossed myself.

It was as if I'd answered another question. "Ah! You think they're come from the devil to torment us!"

Did I? "Perhaps. Or perhaps they're heaven-sent to warn us. All I know, my lord, is that I have never yet seen one."

He gave a short, harsh laugh.

"My lord, you misjudge me. I know they say only the pure can see one."

"So they do. So an adulteress would not. . . ."

"Adulteress! Not I, my lord!" Should I make it entirely clear? I blushed for my lord Polonius. Did I owe him any loyalty? Not as much as I owed the late king's son. "Free with my eyes I may be, Highness, but I'm no loose woman. I'm as pure in body as any lady entering a nunnery."

Another bark of laughter. "A nunnery! Next you'll be saying Polonius is a fishmonger keeping a bawdyhouse!"

"Not that sort of nunnery, either, my lord. Enough of your jests. As for Polonius, to be wife and no wife is no laughing matter."

He nodded. "Better that than to be a whore, Maria. When the old man dies, we'll find you a lusty prince for your bed," he added, with a courtly kiss of my hand to show he meant no unkindness.

"Dies? Creaky gates always last the longest, my lord. As for a prince—go to! I'd be more likely to fetch up with that court card,

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Osric. If he could ever frame his mouth round such an ordinary word as marriage. They say that manners make the man—but I'll swear he bowed to his mother's breast before he suckled."

He threw his head back and laughed. "My good Maria! Well, there may be a few soldiers visiting our court. Fortinbras, for instance."

"Fortinbras!" My eyes must have gleamed. I'd seen him when he'd accompanied his father here on a state visit. Then he'd been scarcely bearded. Now he'd be just the young man for Ophelia to have one of her crushes on. Poor Hamlet. I asked more soberly, "But why should he come here?"

"The esteemed Claudius has given permission for Fortinbras of Norway to lead his army across our soil. He intends to wrest a few acres from Poland."

"Poland! Such poor farming land it wouldn't yield five ducats an acre. What a waste of young life. Why doesn't war carry off the old?" Polonius, for instance. "Sweet Prince, take care, I beg you."

He looked at me with sudden kindness as I clasped his hands. "We all have to die, Maria."

"But not before our time, sir, if I may say so. Now, enough of this chatter. They say the players are to come again. Imagine being able to remember all those words! And say them in public! As if they really meant them, too. But perhaps it's not such an achievement. My Lord Polonius tells me he was a noted actor in his youth. If he ever was young, that is." I sighed. "Well, I must see they are well lodged and well fed. The poor lads, spending all their time on the road . . ."

The next thing Polonius and Claudius were plotting fairly turned my stomach. Gertrude was to send for Hamlet and tell him to explain his behaviour. There had certainly been a few moments of oddness during our conversation, but on the whole he was no madder than you'd expect any king to be, with all that inbreeding. But apparently he and Ophelia had had a huge argument, ending in her tears. By some coincidence Polonius had heard it all. Coincidence? I doubted it, especially when I heard his next move. I knew Gertrude was worried about him—were not we all?—but no decent mother would have wanted an extra pair of ears at the interview. Yes, my husband was to secrete himself in the room and spy.

"You cannot do that," I expostulated as we made our way down to the evening's performance by the players. "It's a betrayal of trust!"

"My dear Maria, madness in great ones must not go unwatched."

"But by his mother, not by the Lord Chamberlain."

An unpleasant smirk played about his lips.

"And what if he doesn't confess all? What then?"

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"Then he will be sent to England. They owe us tribute and will do the king's bidding instantly."

"And what is his bidding?"

The old man's face closed. "Only His Majesty is privy to that," he lied, his fluttering left eyelid giving him away.

Hamlet sent to England? The king's bidding? I must slip away from the play and search the king's study.

Hamlet to be beheaded! That was what the document on the king's desk said. Instantly. As soon as he set foot on English soil. Without even time for shriving. Even as I reeled, desperate to warn the good young man, I heard voices and—just as if I were my husband—I hid behind a pillar. Something had truly enraged Claudius: I could hear him in the corridor outside, screaming with fury at Gertrude, who, lacking the backbone of a flea, was yes-sir-no-sirring him like a very drab. But then in he marched, with those two blowflies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and he grabbed the letter and pressed it into their hand.

I must warn Prince Hamlet! But how could I do that, when I knew he was closeted with his mother?

I used the secret stair behind the arras, meant to be used for a rapid escape in time of attack. As I ran, I drew from my pocket my scissors. There was just a chance that if Polonius felt their blade at his throat he would believe he was threatened by a man and I could drag him away. Once he was safely bestowed in our chamber, I could run back to Hamlet and get him out of Elsinore via the same staircase. He was king, by every right but anointment. He was my liege lord and he had to be saved, even if I lost my life in the endeavour.

It wasn't I but Polonius who died. As soon as Polonius felt the blade, he screamed. I slit his throat. My lord must have thought he was threatened by an assassin, and ran his sword through the fabric. Again and again he jabbed, till, fearful for my life, I backed into the secret doorway.

When Hamlet pulled back the arras, he assumed it was his blade that had killed the rash intruding fool. I wanted to step forward and explain, but, one of his fits of madness upon him, he turned from me and berated his mother in such terms that I could not stay to listen. So I turned and ran.

Would staying have made any difference? It seemed at the time that even if I had confessed to the murder, even if I had been hanged for the offence, Hamlet would have been despatched for England. All I could do was slip a hasty letter in his pack, warning him what was planned and telling him to insert on the death warrant their names, not his. For my own protection, I asked him—if

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he survived—to pretend he had a premonition, and acted of his own accord.

I told myself that this way I could be there to support Ophelia and even Laertes when he returned posthaste to find his father dead and his sister in strong hysterics. As usual, they all indulged her every whim. I advised bloodletting and a lowering diet. They allowed her to roam free and to harm herself. All Laertes did was raid my chest of herbs and simples, claiming he could not sleep for grief. Now that he sleeps forever, I know his true motive for the theft. It was to poison the rapier with which he was to stab Hamlet in a fencing match.

Oh yes. Thanks to my message, Hamlet dealt summarily with the two supposed friends and returned to claim his inheritance. He came back on the worst possible day: that of Ophelia's funeral. Yes, the silly girl, with no one to curb her wantonness now her father was gone, had got herself pregnant by one of the serving men and drowned herself when the pennyroyal I'd given her did no good. No one could tell Laertes: He would have killed every last man in the garrison in revenge.

I spoke long and stern to Gertrude. There was no one else to convince her that Hamlet was a true loyal son to his father and that her husband was a cheap usurper. And I think at the end that she believed me. Did she not, even in the throes of death, accidentally poisoned by a draught Claudius had prepared for Hamlet, try to protect her son? Even though to do so was to betray her husband? At least she died with Hamlet's name on her lips.

My dear sweet prince died nobly, in his beloved Horatio's arms. And then in marched Fortinbras. In the miserable bloodbath that was the court, he silenced all by asserting his rights over the country.

And over me.

"In my country," he said, in that strange guttural accent of his, "it is the duty of the conqueror to take to wife the widow of the vanquished. You are the senior lady of the court. I claim you as my prize."

So I ended with the prince Ophelia would have adored. As marriages go, it was neither bad nor good—a matter of convenience. I never wanted for anything, but have never been truly happy.

There are times when I wander the battlements, hoping to hear the ghost of Prince Hamlet assuring me I am forgiven. I know he's visited Horatio. As he himself pointed out, however, spirits speak only to the pure. So some days I think he judges me as I judge myself. As a failure. But then Horatio will remind me what the prince once said to him:

There's a divinity doth shape our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. ●

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THE ALIMONY PRISON

by Lou Manfredo

In the roaring, wild year of 1927, the Alimony Prison, nestled discreetly on Greenwich Village's MacDougal Street, was arguably the classiest speakeasy in all of New York City.

The brainchild of an ex-prizefighter and professional gambler named Dominick Cosenza, the speak included among its considerable boasts the very finest Canadian and European booze, the smoothest, hottest New Orleans jazz, and the cleanest, most enthusiastic Hell's Kitchen hookers.

Splashy décor surrounded individual cafe tables arranged freely before an expansive, elevated stage. A full jazz band commanded the rear stage and downstage the most beautiful scantly-clad showgirls performed nightly to an always packed house.

Most tables were encircled by thick, pliable vertical rubber bars, and patrons would part the bars gingerly to access the gilded and cushioned chairs. Waiters wearing prison garb, gray overalls with horizontal black stripes and matching pillbox caps, rushed to serve them with rum and Cokes, Seven and Sevens, icy English gin martinis, and the best cabaret food in town. Only the rival 21 Club, located just a short walk away, could even begin to match the Prison's overall quality.

The main clubroom sat at street level; the brothel, consisting of ten small, well-furnished bedrooms and intimate lounge area, occupied the second floor.

On the topmost third floor, an exact mirror-image nightclub stood silent and unused. On those periodic occasions when the downstairs club was raided and padlocked by prearrangement with the local authorities, the third floor was brought to life and open for business the very next evening. As soon as Cosenza and

Story writer Lou Manfredo hails from Manalapan, New Jersey. He has not previously appeared in *EQMM*, but he has a story, "Case Closed," in the award-winning crime anthology *Brooklyn Noir* (Akashic; 2004), which has also been selected by editor Joyce Carol Oates for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2005*. His piece for us is a hardboiled historical set in 1920s New York.

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his legal representatives had attended to all legalities and fines, the downstairs club would reopen and the good times would roll uninterrupted until the next scheduled raid.

Now, on this particular night, Lily O'Rourke Cosenza peered out at the women standing before her and sighed: They were just children, really, and Lily, at twenty-seven, having to deal with them all.

"All right, ladies," she said, in her very best mother-of-the-realm voice. "Just about time for us to open up for business. But before we do, I need to ask for a couple of volunteers."

The "ladies"—eight prostitutes in various stages of splendid boudoir attire—returned Lily's casual smile with icy hostility.

"We surely ain't none of us volunteerin' for nothin', Lil, so just go on and pick out the ones of us with the fattest asses and get it over with," said one young thing, Mabel McGuire, twenty years old and five foot five, one hundred and forty pounds if an ounce, and hard as a Packard's chrome bumper.

Lily allowed her smile to grow cold and her eyes to dull.

"Well, now," she said, dabbing a forefinger at Mabel, "that would be you, honey, sure as Jesus wore sandals to Sunday school."

Mabel frowned as the girls around her giggled.

"Figured as much," she said with resignation.

Trying as it was at times, Lily enjoyed running the second-floor brothel for her husband, the man known to one and all as "Big Dom." It beat peddling butts or shaking a leg on some smoky speakeasy stage, both of which had served as careers in her recent past. Yes, she liked madaming a whole lot better: easier on the feet *and* on the soul. And it didn't hurt one little bit to be married to the boss, her brooding and leathery-tough ex-prizefighter-turned-saloonkeeper. It provided a powerful touch of job security to her position.

Lily allowed herself a softer smile before speaking. "Girls," she continued, cooing comfort at them, "you all know how this works. Every once in a time, the coppers raid the joint to show the citizens how honest they are. It's like that for every speak in the city, every speak in the country, I figure. The deal Big Dom cut this time was they could take out the downstairs and grab two girls from outta here. They'll hit us tomorrow night and then the joint reopens upstairs the next night, same as usual, and we here in the cathouse, well, we just keep on purring, just with two less girls. Big Dom pays all bails, legal fees, and fines, and a few days from now he opens back up on the ground floor and the two girls get cut loose and come back to work. Everybody comes away happy—saints, sinners, cops, and citizens."

Mable McGuire inserted a finger into her right ear, furiously working it against a dry-skin itch she'd been suffering ever since the weather had turned so damn cold. "Excepts me," she said. "I

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winds up gettin' goosed by some horny coppers and dyke-rubbed in the Women's Lockup."

Lily brightened her smile. "Why, Mabel, dearie, I know that feeling. That's why I got my man to make it right this time. Big Dom says there's twenty dollars a day in it for each girl that volunteers."

An excited chatter and raising of hands suddenly surrounded Lily, and cries of "Take me!" and "I'll do it!" rang in her ears.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said sweetly. "If I didn't know any better I'd just swear you ladies only do this for the money. Well, I will be damned."

Later that evening when Lily entered the cluttered first-floor office, she found Big Dom hunched over his massive mahogany desk, an unlit Cuban cigar clenched between his yellowed, uneven teeth, a scowl working at the corners of his mouth.

"Sit," he said gruffly, without raising his eyes to her.

She dropped heavily into one of the upholstered dark blue velvet chairs before the desk and sighed. He seemed in a black mood, and Lily, who, except for her somewhat voracious sexual appetites and the rather irksome necessities they entailed, had little tolerance for men in general, had even less for those in a foul mood. She sat silently, waiting for him to speak again.

When, after a few moments, he raised his heavy-browed, flat black eyes from the ledger book before him and met the pale gray of her own eyes, she smiled demurely.

"Hello, dearie," she purred. "How's my big guy?"

He knotted his hands together on the desktop and slowly leaned his massive upper body toward her. Big Dom made a strong and conscious effort to ignore her stunning beauty, despite the inviting glisten from her bobbed chestnut hair and the promise of warmth from her body.

"You line up two broads to get pinched tomorrow night?" he asked, his voice hard.

Lily could see, without needing to look, the coarse pubiclike hair that matted the back of his large, gnarled fighter's hands on the desk before her. It caused the hair at her nape to stir.

"Yes," she said, her tone neutral and matter-of-fact. "Mabel McGuire and Shakey Miles."

Now his scowl deepened, the cigar tip dipping against the increased clench of his teeth.

"Shakey? Why Shakey? She pulls in nearly a C-note a night. Get one of the others, another pig like Mabel."

Her smile deepened as she thought: How fortunate it was that Big Dom owned one of the city's most profitable speakeasies. He'd have little influence over man or woman otherwise.

"Okay, honey, if that's what you want."

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"Yes, that's what I want. Now beat it, I'm busy."

She stood slowly, admiring the sparkle of the three-carat diamond on her finger as it tossed the glow from the green-shaded desk lamp about the room. As she turned to leave, she heard him bark once more but did not bother to turn and face him.

"And Lily," he said, "I'll tell you somethin' else I want. I want you and that Joe Rudi to knock it off. There's more than some might say I was crazy, but I ain't blind and I ain't stupid. I hear about you and that bull-necked Sicilian goon playing footsies just one more time, I'm gonna rip his lungs out. Then I'm gonna bust up that pretty face of yours real good and put you to workin' the kitchen steamin' pots with the Chinks. You hear me?"

Still without turning, she answered, keeping her voice light, her tone singsong. Lily had been around, and she knew when a dangerous man was mad, and she knew when one was bad mad. Big Dom Cosenza was bad mad.

"Nothin' going on there, lover. I swear on my soul, but I hear you. Joe and me won't even speak on a single thing but Prison business—Big Dom business." She paused and waited for the dismissive grunt she knew was coming, then left the room. Softly.

Guiseppe Cataldo Rudialaro was thirty years old and known throughout both the criminal and societal worlds of New York City as Joe Rudi. He had shared a misspent childhood and youth prowling the South Brooklyn streets and brothels with his lifelong friend, Alphonse Capone. And then, eight long years ago, in 1919, a local misfortune had befallen young Alphonse and driven him off into the protective womb of Chicago's underworld.

Young Rudi had then taken up with Charles Luciano, a bootlegger and pimp known to one and all as "Lucky." Joe had initially served as a low-rung enforcer and debt collector, gradually working his way up to occasional hit man. But later, as signs of Rudi's awkward addiction to alcohol and games of chance had become apparent to Luciano, genuinely fond of young Joe, Lucky had assigned him a lesser role as overseer in Big Dom's classy joint down in the Village. It had, after all, been Luciano's money and booze, political juice and muscle, which had set Big Dom up in business, and as any Astor or Carnegie might do, Lucky had had the foresight to put friendly and loyal eyes and ears into the midst of his investment. Sometimes, Luciano well knew, a man made his own luck.

With Rudi serving as an extremely competent and enthusiastic bouncer for the speakeasy and brothel, Big Dom had harbored no complaints. It had been a win-win situation: a Luciano trademark. So far, for nearly three years, it had worked well.

Now, just before midnight, Rudi sat hunched over good English gin and clear ice while seated at the small, dim corner bar tucked

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at the rear of the brothel's lounge. He watched with hooded, half-drunken eyes as two hookers worked a customer, swelling an imagination of sexual anticipation in the poor sucker that Joe knew even they, with the combined might of their considerable abilities, would never satisfy.

He slowly sipped at his gin and turned his attention back to Lily, who was perched sensuously on the black leather barstool beside him.

"I ain't scareda no punch-drunk ex-pug," he said, the cigarette- and alcohol-ravaged vocal cords in his throat grating on each syllable. "He can name his poison: fists, knives, guns, or better. I can take him three ways from Sunday."

Lily smiled at him sweetly and patted gently at his hand where it was clenched tightly on the bar's edge.

"I know that, sweetie," she purred, her eyelids fluttering seductively as she thought: What predictable fools these thugs all are. "But, dearie, that's not the point. The point is, Momma likes the moola, and Big Dom's got the big pile. You come up just a little short in that department. So, we need to break it off—clean—grand as it all was."

She leaned in closer, allowing her cleavage to compress and her five-dollar-a-bottle imported perfume to reach into his brain. Rudi's face, at best impassive and bulldoggish, turned colder and meaner.

"There's a name used for a dame talks like that," he said, allowing more hiss into his usual rasp.

Lily pursed her lips. "But Joe, lover, you're too much a class act to use that on me. You know, baby, nobody ever loved me better'n you, Joe. We'll always have that."

Joe Rudi had the education of a street orphan and the finesse of a Roman galley slave, but behind his hard dark eyes an animal's cunning danced lightly and vigilantly.

He smiled at her, cold and cruel, sneering as he spoke.

"Bullshit, baby. You run those lines on the headwaiter and that newspaperman you got your eye on. Me and you, we ain't got a damned thing. But startin' night after tomorrow, right after the raid is done with, you can start skimmin' a little more of the nightly take. Let's say a C-note more. And *then* we'll have us somethin'. That's my price."

Lily frowned. This did not sound right. She had been prepared for the roar of wounded manly pride and a painfully cut-off libido. But this. This sounded like greed. This she could respect, and it frightened her.

"Your price? But baby, your price for what?"

Rudi slipped an Old Gold between his thick lips and dug out a diamond-encrusted lighter. Its gold face was inscribed, "To my paisano, with friendship forever, Al." He struck the flame and

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raised his eyes to hers. Still smiling around the cigarette, he now spoke softly.

"My price to not go see Big Dom. My price to not tell him about that cute little dimple you got on your left ass cheek. To not tell him . . . stuff. You know, dolly . . . stuff."

Lily sat back on her stool. She had a sudden vision of a hospital emergency room, with doctors peering down at her face, horror in their eyes, blood running warm on her skin. Then, suddenly, the hot and smelly steaming kitchen of the Alimony Prison pushed into her mind's eye and the *chop-chop* cadence of Chinese laborers began to echo within her head.

She didn't know which image terrified her more, but she did know one thing: Neither was to her liking. No, she thought, this was not quite what she had in mind.

Lily was up and about early the next morning, eight o'clock, without a care that Dom would ever know she had left the cozy confines of their Sullivan Street townhouse. They had both rolled in at five A.M., after closing the Prison down and locking up the night's receipts in the hidden safe. Big Dom had been good and drunk, and Lily knew he would not awaken until noon at the very earliest. And she planned to be back home long before that.

Lily quickly and quietly dressed in her best uptown clothes, as the nature of her errand made it best conducted away from the small-town intimacy of the twisting, tree-lined Village streets. Yes, it was better that she head for the hustle and bustle of Midtown, away from her local celebrity status—just another face in the great metropolitan crowd. She invested seventy-five cents in taxi fare and luxuriated in the comfort of an Oldsmobile's rear seat, thankful for the grizzled cabby's silence as he skillfully snaked through the workday traffic.

Later, a second cab sped her homeward, and she took leave of it at the corner of Sullivan and West Third, walking the last half-block to the townhouse. And when Big Dom awoke at one-fifteen that afternoon, Lily greeted him with a smile from their kitchen table.

"'Morning, baby," she said. "I've got some nice strong coffee for my big strong man. You sit down and let me serve it to you."

Big Dom paused in the doorway, waiting for the bourbon to stop pounding in his temples. His bloodshot eyes took in the beauty of Lily, her full, lush body swelling the silk and satin nightgown she wore. He smiled. What a lucky son of a bitch he was, he thought. Had the world by the short ones, he did, and he would never give it up.

"Thanks, dolly," he said. "While I'm drinkin' it, you go get yourself ready for me. I need a little lovin' this morning."

Lily went to the stove and poured black coffee into his favorite

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mug. Turning, she allowed the nightgown to slip itself open a bit. She smiled at his hulking mass, still hovering in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sure glad to hear that, baby," she cooed. "Nobody ever loved me better than you, Daddy. You hurry down this coffee. I'll be waiting for you."

At exactly ten o'clock that evening, three police vehicles rolled to a stop in front of the Alimony Prison. Lieutenant Francis Dermott McAdams, thirty-two years old and a strapping six feet two inches tall, climbed from the lead vehicle, a black Studebaker. Closing the door behind him, he leaned into the open passenger window and spoke to the patrolman sitting in the driver's seat.

"You stay waitin' here, Douglas, lad," he said, his brogue nearly untouched despite fifteen years of American citizenship. "I expect it won't take me and the boys long to be clearin' out this cesspool."

He ambled to the sidewalk and eyed the plain red steel door of the nondescript rowhouse so common to the Village streets. When Sergeant Behan appeared at his side, McAdams smiled without turning.

"All right, Behan, go and give it a knock. Big Dom will be openin' it personally, I'm told, and quite the honor he must be figurin' he's laying upon us, I wager. Go on, lad, give it a knock."

Once inside, McAdams waved a casual hand at the ten uniformed patrolmen who had ridden in the small paddy wagon which now sat parked behind his Studebaker.

"Go on, boys, grab a citizen or two before they all scramble down a sewer pipe," he said casually. Upon first seeing the police, two dozen patrons had begun a mad dash for an exit hidden at the rear of the club. As they ran, the musicians onstage stood and slowly began to break down their equipment in preparation for moving it all to the equally expansive stage on the third floor. Tomorrow night, after all, would be just another workday.

McAdams turned to face Cosenza. Big Dom stood impassively next to the lanky lieutenant, unconsciously trying to stretch his own five foot ten frame to equal that of McAdams.

"Well, Dominick, it seems an amazing coincidence there's such a light crowd I'm witnessing. Seems your regulars have chosen this very evenin' of all such evenin's not to drop in. The hand of Providence, it clearly is."

Big Dom frowned. McAdams perplexed him, and he didn't like it. He didn't like McAdams much, either.

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled. "Providence."

"You wait here, Dominick, till we can cart you off and square your bail away. I had them bring along a car just for you. Not as jazzy as that Stutz Bearcat you drive, I worry, but a good, solid

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Plymouth sedan. I'll be goin' on upstairs to see the ladies now, if you don't mind."

Big Dom nodded. "Go on. Lil's up there, she'll get the two girls for you."

McAdams turned to Behan, who stood a discreet ten paces away casually eyeing a bottle of Beefeater that sat unopened in an ice bucket at the nearest table.

"Sergeant Behan," McAdams said, his voice cheerful and light. "I'll be goin' upstairs now. You keep all the lads down here. It's tact and Christian charity we'll be needin' up in that sin parlor, and I'll be only trustin' in meself for that job." He glanced at the object of Behan's attention and smiled tightly.

"Why don't you and some of the boys in blue be checkin' for evidence, like good policemen ought to. Why, from here, there's no way of tellin' if that's real gin or not. But you let me know, now, lad, when I get back down here."

He turned back to Cosenza. "I'll be takin' my leave of you, now, Dominick. Why don't you go and take a seat in that Plymouth, my brother. Behan will be out in a short bit to run you down to the station house."

Dominick Cosenza leaned his hard-muscled frame inward to the lieutenant. He kept his voice low when he spoke.

"I took a count this afternoon, Francis. Make sure those coppers of yours keep it light. A halfa case each, no more." He tapped at a temple with a thick forefinger. "I got the count right up here, Francis. Remember that."

McAdams let his own face smile coldly. "And it's good to know there's somethin' up there, Dominick—besides visions of whore tail and dollar signs, that is."

They held one another's gaze for five full seconds and then, as if by prearrangement, both looked away in unison. That successfully concluded their business, and Big Dom turned towards the checkroom and his heavy cashmere topcoat.

McAdams crossed the cafe floor to the discreet elevator at the rear wall. He stopped three feet short of the burly, squat man who stood guard there, clad in a tuxedo which stretched across his enormous muscled arms and chest.

"I'll be goin' upstairs now, Guido, if you please," McAdams said in the same cheerful singsong he had used on Big Dom. The man tilted his head and gazed across the floor. When he saw Big Dom give him a discreet nod, he stepped aside.

"Name's John," he said harshly as McAdams stepped into the tiny confines of the elevator.

The lieutenant turned and pulled at the operating lever to activate the lift. He smiled at the man as the door began to close.

"Why of course it is, Guido, it's the only one your mother could spell, God bless her soul."

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Lily crossed the floor of the brothel lounge and greeted him at the elevator. They embraced warmly, exchanging small kisses on one another's cheeks.

"It's good you're here, Francis," Lily said, her smile radiant and genuine.

McAdams returned the smile fondly. "Ah, Lillian, you're as lovely as a picture." Now he stepped back from her, took each of her hands in his, and gave an exaggerated sad frown. "And I'm askin' meself for the thousandth time, how for the love of Jesus did a sweet young Irish lass such as yourself come to be mixin' up with the likes of these dagos? If it was the high life you were cravin', Tommy Sullivan runs a fine old Irish pub on Seventh Avenue, and there's no more invitin' a speakeasy than Rory O'Moore's East Side joint. Then, all these unpleasantries could well be avoided, lass. As me sainted old mother was sayin' just last night, these wops are no better than murderin' English dogs."

Lily pulled him towards her and kissed his cheek once more. "You're sweet, Francis, but we've already spoken of this. Why, it was just this morning you were telling me the very same thing."

Now McAdams smiled. "The truth is firm, Lillian, and same in the evenin' as it is at morn. But we'll move on. Do you have two girls lined up for the facin' of justice, dearie?"

"Yes, I do."

He nodded, a serious expression running across his features. "And are they clean, Lillian? In case some of the lads get a bit frisky in the paddy wagon?"

Lily smiled coyly. "Why, Francis, all my girls are clean. They take a bath every night. Most nights."

He nodded again. "Well, then, run along. Go fetch 'em."

She glanced around the room, assuring herself that it was empty of anyone but them.

"But Francis," she said in a low whisper, "is our business confirmed?"

He smiled, his dark blue eyes kind and full of true affection. "Of course, me darlin'," he said in equally low tones. "Big Dom is on his way, in the trusted hands of good Sergeant George Behan, my right-hand man. Your troubles are all about to end, Lillian, as the Good Lord is my judge. The wheels are set to turnin'."

She smiled. "I knew I could count on you, Francis. As long as we're friends, I'll *never* see the inside of that damn kitchen."

Now he smiled. "Nor will my children ever be layin' eyes upon the bleak and sorrowful walls of the poorhouse, saints be praised."

Lily left for the rear bedroom, returning shortly with Mabel McGuire and Shakey Miles's replacement, Margarita Miller. McAdams smiled at them; they were old acquaintances.

"Get yourselves downstairs now, ladies, if you will. Look for Patrolman Krausman. You can't miss him, he's the Jew and the

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only copper won't be suckin' on a bottle a booze when you get down there. He'll run you in to face the wrath of the law and learn you your lessons. Go on now."

The girls entered the elevator and disappeared. McAdams turned back to face Lily.

"And now, Lillian, where would that baboon, Rudi, be hibernatin'? In one of the back rooms samplin' the wares, and gratis to boot, I'd wager."

She smiled at him sweetly. "Exactly right, Francis. You wait here. I'll get him."

As he waited, McAdams watched as a sudden parade of prostitutes, free of their labors for the balance of the night, filed through the lounge and out the rear fire door to a stairway leading to the back alley. McAdams smiled at each one, greeting them by name, and they variously blew kisses, toodle-oohed, or shook their bosoms for him as they went by. Ah, he thought, it had been a sweet day when, ten years earlier, he had been driven by the dismal employment opportunities for a poor young Irish immigrant to sit for the policemen's civil service exam. A sweet day, indeed.

When Lily reentered the room, a brooding, obviously drunken Joe Rudi was trailing behind her. He went straight to the bar and reached behind it, pulling down a bottle of gin. Taking two glasses, he sat at the bar and turned to McAdams.

"You wanna drink?" he asked, his words slightly slurred.

McAdams smiled. "Why, Joseph, I truly would. But I'm on duty and I've got me reputation to think of."

Rudi shrugged and poured gin into his own glass.

"Suit yourself," he said, sipping at it. "But there ain't nobody here but us, and we got no concerns about reputations, I guess."

McAdams turned to Lily with a tight smile.

"Now is that so, Lillian? Are we to say the whole floor is empty, 'cept for we three Christian souls?"

She returned the smile. "Empty as our graves, Francis. I checked myself."

McAdams moved to the bar. "Then pour me that drink, Joseph. I'm not fussy who it is I drink with."

Rudi poured two fingers of gin into the glass. McAdams frowned at it. "Well, for the love of Mary, Rudi, try to remember the whole damn world ain't Eye-talian. You're drinkin' with an Irishman now, lad, so heavy-up that hand a bit."

Rudi scowled, but again reached for the bottle. He filled the rock glass, six ounces of straight gin; clear as water, fragrant as a flower. McAdams lifted the glass and downed half of it in a single swallow. He smiled and licked at his lips, raising the glass in Rudi's direction.

"To your health, of course," he said, and then swallowed the balance of the booze.

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Now he stepped back four feet from Rudi and squinted.

"Joseph," he said, a scolding tone creeping into his voice. "Joseph, I'm afraid my policeman's eye has detected a bit of bulge there at your waist. Would that be a heater you're packin' there, lad? And on the very night there's to be a lawful crackdown on the joint? That would be insultin' to me, Joseph. A bit insultin'."

Rudi smiled. "Relax, copper. The gun's legit. I got all the paperwork I need."

McAdams stepped back another foot, an exaggerated look of shock washing across his face. "Why, Joseph, heaven forbid you're implying the boys down at Pistol Compliance displayed such a serious lapse of judgment as to issue a thug such as yourself the legal papers for a carry permit? Is that what you're implyin'?"

Rudi smiled and drained his glass. He refilled it and then McAdams's.

"Yeah," he said, an amused smile on his lips. "That's what I'm implyin'."

McAdams shook his head sadly. "Well, then, Joseph, do me a service before I join you in another taste. Slip that heater out and lay it down on the bar. I'll be feelin' better with me eyeballs able to rest on it."

Rudi shrugged. "Whatever you say, copper," he said, a scornful sneer creeping into his tone.

He reached into his waistband and slipped the gun out from under his worn tuxedo jacket. He placed it on the bar top and slid it five feet away. McAdams glanced at the heavy Remington revolver and sighed.

"Well, Lillian," he said, his eyes planted squarely on Rudi. "Time to call it an evenin'."

Lily stepped back further from the bar and smiled. "Yes, Francis, it is indeed."

Rudi spun his barstool around and faced McAdams. "Already?" he said, his smile now dismissive. "I thought you was an Irish booze master. One drink and you quit?"

McAdams smiled coldly. "No, Joseph Rudi. It's *you* that's quittin'."

Now Rudi's smile turned to a puzzled frown. "What?" he asked.

From her distance, Lily spoke. "Give my regards to my first husband, Joe," she said sweetly.

Rudi looked at her, clearly baffled, the gin muddling his brain.

"Your first husband? Tony Olives? Ain't he dead?"

McAdams drew the forty-four service revolver from under his heavy woolen winter coat.

"Yes, indeed he is, Joseph. Dead and burnin' in hell, by the saints above us," he said.

He raised the gun and fired. Lily flinched against the crashing boom. The heavy slug tore through the center of Rudi's heart, and

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he died halfway to the hardwood floor.

McAdams stepped quickly down the bar. Using the now-hot barrel of his own revolver, he pushed Rudi's gun off the bar top and onto the brothel floor, then kicked it gently towards the leaking, lifeless body. He turned and faced Lily.

"Imagine the brass of the man," he said. "Rushin' at a trained law-enforcement officer such as Francis McAdams, a gun in his hand. Why, it was a damn-near godless suicide, it was."

Lily raised her eyes from the corpse. She smiled at McAdams.

"And in front of a witness, no less. What *ever* was he thinking?"

McAdams shook his head and compressed his lips. "Lillian, it was the demon liquor doin' his thinkin', that's what it was. That's why the boys and I do our damnedest to close down these sin parlors. Praise the Eighteenth Amendment for the lives it has saved!"

They moved silently closer to the body, standing shoulder to shoulder and gazing down at it. Without either looking away from Rudi's corpse, they spoke.

"Now, Lillian," he said. "what was that deal again? Fifty dollars a night for a year's time, was it?"

"That's it, Francis, my dear. Fifty a night every night the cathouse is open, for *one* full year."

He nodded. "And a tidy sum it'll be. It's not a joke raisin' two children on a lowly policeman's pay. The whores' money will go to good use meetin' the needs of Francis junior and Mary Elizabeth, I can assure you that, lass."

With that, the rear door flew wide and the elevator behind them slid open. A half-dozen policemen, pistols drawn and with the brims of their hats turned backwards, rushed in. McAdams held up a calming hand.

"Take a beat, lads, and wind down. The thing is done with, thank the saints. The lady and I have escaped a tragedy. Alas, we've lost a soul here, boys, and a brother in Jesus. But it couldn't be avoided."

The officers gathered around Lily and McAdams, their guns dangling in their now-relaxed hands. After a moment, McAdams looked up and gazed about at his underlings, a happy smile lighting his face.

"Ah, just think on it, lads. What a great and wondrous country we live in, a country where the likes of us can stand, and the likes of Joseph Rudi can die, on the very same floor where the saintly and honorable Mayor Jimmy Walker himself trod just a few short nights ago."

Now he looked into Lily's beautiful gray eyes as she smiled up at him. His mind swam with memories of past sexual delights shared with the woman behind those eyes, and her smile told him there were yet more to come.

Ah yes, he thought. A great and wondrous country indeed. ●

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TEST DRIVE

by Martin Edwards

The following story by Martin Edwards was nominated for one of Britain's most distinguished short story awards, the CWA Dagger, this past November. It has never before appeared in print in the U.S. The author has recently started a series of mystery novels set in England's Lake District, with the second entry, *The Cipher Garden*, just out from Poisoned Pen Press. Five Star has also recently released his novel *Suspicious Minds*.

People are like cars. Since Patrick told me this, I can't get it out of my mind. That's one of his gifts. He comes out with something that makes no sense at first, but the moment he explains, you start to see the world through new eyes. Patrick's eyes. He said people are like cars that day in the showroom, the first time we'd met for years. A throwaway line, but when my eyebrows lifted, he jerked a thumb towards the forecourt. Towards the executive saloons and SUVs gleaming in the sunlight, a line of vehicles as immaculate as soldiers on parade.

"You think I'm joking? Come on, Terry, you work with cars all day, every day, you must see I'm right." He flicked a speck from the cuff of his jacket. Armani, of course. "Take a look at that muscular roadster. A mean machine, if ever I saw one. When that beast growls, you'd better watch out."

I laughed. Same old Patrick. People always laughed when he was around. He never needed encouragement and now he was in full flow.

"And the model with lissom lines over there? Chic and elegant, but beware. You can't put your trust in her."

"Like Olivia Lumb," I said, joining in. Out of the blue, our old friendship was being rekindled. "Remember warning me off that night at the Bali, telling me I'd do better with Sarah-Jane? I wonder whatever happened to Olivia."

Something changed in Patrick's expression, as if suddenly his skin had been stretched too tight over his cheekbones. But he kept smiling. Even as a teenager, I'd envied the whiteness of his teeth, but now they shone with all the brilliance that cosmetic dentistry

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can bestow. When he spoke, his voice hadn't lost a degree of warmth.

"Matter of fact, Terry, I married her."

"Oh, right."

My face burned for a few moments, but what had I said? Olivia was beautiful, he'd fallen on his feet. As usual. Years ago, his nickname was Lucky Patrick, everyone called him that, even those who hated him. And a few kids did hate him, the sour and bitter ones who were jealous that he only had to snap his fingers and any girl would come running. Olivia Lumb, eh? After Patrick himself told me that she was bad news, the night of the leavers' disco?

Frankly, I'd always thought she was out of my league, but that night a couple of drinks emboldened me. When I confided in Patrick that I meant to ask her for a dance, he warned me she was heartless and selfish. Not that she cared so well even for herself. She went on eating binges and then made herself sick. She'd scratched at her wrists with her brother's penknife, she'd swallowed her mum's sleeping pills and been rushed into hospital to have her stomach pumped. She dosed up with Prozac because she couldn't cope; she was the ultimate mixed-up kid.

Afterwards, I spent the evening in a corner, talking nonstop and cracking jokes to cheer up Sarah-Jane, whose crush on Patrick he'd encouraged, then failed to reciprocate. Six weeks later I proposed and she said yes. I owed so much to Patrick; his words of warning and his playing hard-to-get with Sarah-Jane had changed my life.

I mustered a man-to-man grin. "Lucky Patrick, eh?"

"Yes," Patrick said. "Lucky me."

"She was the most gorgeous girl in the class," I said quickly. "Obviously I never had a chance. You did me a favour, it avoided any embarrassment. So you finished up together? Well, congratulations."

"Know something, Terry? You really haven't changed."

"You don't think so?" I took it as a compliment, but with Patrick you could never be quite sure. Even at seventeen, at eighteen, his wit used to sting.

"'Course not," he assured me. "A snappy mover, always smart and reliable, even if your steering is a bit erratic, lets you down every now and then."

I wasn't offended. No point in taking umbrage with Patrick. You could never win an argument, he shifted his ground with the speed of a Ferrari. Besides, he was right. Occasionally I do try too hard, I suppose. I go over the top when I'm trying to close a difficult sale. I take corners too fast when I'm trying out a new sports car. I'm one endorsement away from losing my licence; I know I ought to take more care.

"It's great to see you again," I said.

I meant it, and not only because he fancied buying our top-of-the-range executive saloon. The sale would guarantee enough

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commission to earn the award for representative of the month and win a weekend break for two in Rome, no expense spared. Just the pick-me-up Sarah-Jane needed. More even than that, I'd missed Patrick. We'd hung around together at sixth-form college. Both of us were bored with the academic stuff, neither of us wanted to doss around at uni for another three years, simply to help the government massage the employment figures. We yearned to get out into the real world and start earning serious money. I learned a lot from Patrick, he was like a smart older brother, although there were only six months between us. He talked about going into sales and that's where I got the idea for my own career. But I didn't need telling that he'd climbed the greasy pole much faster. The Swiss watch and the cream, crisply tailored suit spoke louder than any words.

Fixing on his Ray-Ban Aviators, he nodded at the forecourt. "Let's have a closer look, shall we?"

"You'll love her."

We strolled into the sun, side by side, just like old times. Showing Patrick the features, and as he put the car through its paces on the test drive, I felt confidence surging through me, revving up my engine. This was what I did, it wasn't just selling cars, it was selling dreams. I knew the brochure by heart, the phrases came spinning out as if I'd just thought of them.

. . . The style is very emotive . . . good looks based on clear reasoning . . . touch the sports-mode console button for a yet more spirited ride . . . sensuous curves of the door panels and dashboard . . . suspension, chassis, and engine all operate in perfect harmony . . . the precise synergy . . . the fifteen-speaker premium system wraps your senses in rich, true-to-life, beautiful surround sound with concert-hall acoustics . . . intelligent thermal control seat heating . . . ultrasonic sensors for the science of perfect parking . . . real-time enabled DVD-based satellite navigation . . . twin tailpipe baffles lend a sporting accent . . . potent, passionate, state-of-the-art . . . blending priceless power with complete control . . . not so much the finest car in its class as a definitive lifestyle statement.

They are the poets of the twenty-first century, in my opinion, these men (or maybe women?) who script the luxury-car brochures. When I borrow their words, for a few minutes I feel like an actor, declaiming Shakespeare on the stage. And guess what Shakespeare would be writing if he were alive today? Not stodgy plays about tempests or Julius Caesar, that's for sure.

"So what do you think?" I asked as we pulled back onto the forecourt. "Isn't it simply the smoothest ride you've ever known?"

"Yeah, yeah." Patrick's long fingers grazed the leather upholstery. For some strange reason, a picture jostled into my head, an image of him stroking Olivia's pale face while he murmured to her. "Lovely mover. So what sort of deal are we talking for cash up-front?"

I clasped his arm. "For you, I'm sure we can sort out something

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very special."

He smiled at me in a hungry way. Like a fat man contemplating an unwrapped chocolate bar.

"You've made a good salesman, Terry, one of the best. I can picture you with other customers, teasing them like an angler with a fish on the line."

His words cheered me as we discussed figures. I knew Patrick was a skilled negotiator and I did my best to show him how much I too had learned. Working in tandem with Bernard, my sales director, like a comic and a sad-faced straight man, I utilised every—I nearly said "trick in the book"—*stratagem* to avoid taking too much of a bite out of our profit margin. It wasn't exactly a success, because half an hour later we were signing up to the biggest discount I'd ever agreed to. The commission was much less than I'd anticipated, but even Bernard was no match for Patrick. I could see why my old friend was no longer in sales. He'd made enough to set up his own business. Financial services. While Bernard was making a nervous call to seek head-office authorisation, Patrick whispered that he could give me a fantastic opportunity with tax-efficient shelters for my investments. He'd be happy to design a personal balanced-risk strategy for me, as a sort of thank-you for my candour as well as the flexibility on the price of his car.

As we said goodbye, I joked that he'd cost Sarah-Jane and me a weekend in Rome. He smiled and asked after her.

"Lovely girl, you did well there. That cascading red hair, I remember it well. Lot of firepower under the bonnet, eh?"

His cheeky wink wasn't in the least embarrassing. Far from it: His approval of my wife sent a shiver of pleasure down my spine. For years I'd shrunk from the reflection that he'd spurned her advances in the months leading up to the leavers' disco. I hated thinking of her—or of myself, for that matter—as second best. She hadn't hidden her bitterness; that was why we hadn't kept in touch with Patrick. A reluctant sacrifice, but what choice did I have? Besides, she and I were enough for each other.

I contented myself with a smirk of satisfaction. "Let's just say I don't have any complaints."

"I bet you don't, you sly dog. How is she?"

"Fine, absolutely fine. Well . . ."

Honesty compelled me not to leave it there. I told him about the miscarriage and his face became grave. How sad, he said, and then he told me that Olivia didn't want children yet, she wasn't ready and that was fine by him. The fact he was taking me into his confidence at all was flattering; so was the way he talked about Sarah-Jane. It was as though her well-being meant more to him than I had ever realised.

"Remember me to her, now, don't forget. Tell her Lucky Patrick was asking after her."

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"I'll do that," I said, glowing. This man was a success, he had money, status, a beautiful wife, but he hadn't lost his generosity of spirit. How much I'd missed his friendship. "Let me give you a ring when the paperwork's sorted."

"Thanks." He gripped my hand. "It's been good, Terry. I heard you'd done well, but I didn't know quite how well. We ought to keep in touch."

"Too right." I must have sounded as eager as a teenager, but it didn't matter. He and I went back a long way. "Maybe we could get together again sometime."

"The four of us? Fantastic idea, it'll be just like old times."

It wasn't precisely what I had in mind. Olivia and Sarah-Jane as well? Not like old times at all, strictly speaking. But it was just a figure of speech, I knew what he meant. Time's a great healer.

"I don't think so," Sarah-Jane said. "I really don't think so."

She was perched on a kitchen stool, wearing a grubby housecoat. I'd always liked the way she took care of herself; it's important to have pride in your appearance. But since the miscarriage, she'd become moody and irritable and didn't seem to care about anything. The dishwasher had broken down and she hadn't bothered to call out the repairman, let alone tackle the mountain of unwashed crockery in the sink.

"You mooned after him at one time," I reminded her.

"That was then," she said. "Anyway, I finished up with you, didn't I?"

"Don't make it sound like a prison sentence," I joked, wanting to lift her spirits. "Listen, it's just one evening, all right? We're not talking a dinner party, you don't have to entertain them. We'll meet in a bar, so we're not under any obligation to ask them back here sometime. You don't have to see him again."

"But you'll keep seeing him."

"What's wrong with that? He's smart, he's intelligent. Most of all, he's a friend."

She cast her eyes to the heavens. "There's just no arguing with you, is there? Okay, okay, you win." A long sigh. "Salesmen Reunited, huh?"

I reached for her, tried to undo the top button of the housecoat, but she flapped me away, as if swatting a fly.

"I told you last night, I need some personal space."

Of course I didn't push my luck. During the past couple of months she'd cried so easily. Once, in a temper, she'd slapped my face over something and nothing. I needed to give her time, just like it said in the problem pages of the magazines she devoured. She read a lot about life-coaching and unlocking her personal potential. The column-writers promised to give her the key to happiness, but she was still looking for the right door to open. Fair

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enough, I could do "patient and caring." Besides, she'd agreed to see Patrick again. I could show my old friend exactly what he'd missed.

Sarah-Jane may have had mixed feelings about meeting up with Patrick and Olivia, but when it came to the crunch, she didn't let me down. For the first time in an age, we were hitting the town and she summoned up the enthusiasm to put on her makeup and wear the slinky new dress I'd bought by way of encouragement. We couldn't mourn forever, that was my philosophy. We had to move on.

The evening went even better than I'd dared to hope. Patrick was on his very best form and funny anecdotes streamed from him like spray from a fountain. In front of the girls, he congratulated me on my shrewd negotiating techniques. "I thought I had the gift of the blarney," he said, "but Terry knows his cars inside out, you know he can torque for England."

I hadn't seen Sarah-Jane laugh like that in a long time. As for Olivia, she'd always been silent and mysterious and nothing had changed. She spoke in enigmatic monosyllables and paid no more attention to me than when we were both eighteen. I stole a glance at her wrist and saw that it was scarred. The marks were red and recent, not the legacy of a long-ago experiment in self-harm. Hurriedly, I averted my gaze. Her own eyes locked on Patrick all night, though it didn't seem to make him feel uncomfortable. It was as if he expected nothing less.

Sarah-Jane did her best to make conversation. "I'm longing for the day when the doctor signs me off and I can get back to work."

"Terry tells me you work for an estate agency," Patrick said. "I keep trying to persuade Olivia to do a bit of secretarial work to help me out in the business since my last PA left. But it doesn't suit."

Olivia finished her piña colada and gave a faraway smile. "I look after the house."

"I expect it's a mansion," I said cheerily.

"Seven bedrooms, five reception, a cellar, and a granny annex," Patrick said. "Not that we've got a granny, obviously." He mentioned the address; I knew the house, although I'd never seen it. A long curving drive wandered away between massive rhododendron bushes on its journey to the front door.

Olivia's flowing dark hair was even silkier than I remembered, though there still wasn't a spot of colour in her delicate cheeks. I couldn't help recalling how I'd worshiped her from the back of the class when I should have been listening to the teacher's words of wisdom on some writer whose name I forget. He used to say that all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others. It's the only snippet from those lessons that has stuck in my mind. Of course, it's true we don't live in a fair and just world, no sense in moping about it, you just have to do the best that you can for yourself. Beauty is like money, it isn't divided out to us all in neat pro-

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portions. How many women can match the elegance of Olivia Lumb? But I told myself I was more fortunate than Patrick. Looks matter, but a man wants more from his wife.

As Patrick might have said, Olivia was as svelte as the sportiest coupe in the dealership, but never mind. In the early years of our marriage, Sarah-Jane's handling had been tenacious, her performance superb. Of course, nothing lasts forever. It's as true of people as it is of cars. I'd hung my hopes on our starting a family, and losing the baby had devastated both of us. And then, in the course of a single evening at the bar, I saw Sarah-Jane coming back to life, like Sleeping Beauty awoken from a deep slumber. I had Patrick to thank for giving my wife back to me.

For both of us, making friends with Patrick again turned out to be a sort of elixir. He gave me plenty of inside advice on the markets. Tips that made so much sense I didn't hesitate in shifting the money my parents had left me from the building-society account into the shelters he recommended. As he pointed out, even keeping cash under the floorboards was far from risk-free. After all, if you were missing out on high dividends and extra performance, you were taking an investment decision, and not a smart one.

As for Sarah-Jane, her eyes regained their sparkle, her cheeks their fresh glow. When I teased her that she hadn't even wanted to set eyes on Patrick after all these years, she had to accept I'd been proved right. She was even happy for us to host a barbeque on our new patio, so that we could reciprocate after a dinner party at Patrick's lovely home. Olivia didn't cook the meal; her household management seemed to consist of hiring posh outside caterers. It didn't matter. I sat next to another of Patrick's clients and spent an enjoyable evening extolling the virtues of the 475 while Patrick entertained Sarah-Jane with tales of double-dealing in the murky world of financial services. People talk about dishonest car salesmen, and fair enough, but the money men are a hundred times worse if Patrick's gleeful anecdotes about his business competitors were to be believed.

We asked Bernard and his wife along to the barbeque and it wasn't until we'd guzzled the last hot dog that I found myself together with Olivia. As usual, she'd said little or nothing. I'd drunk a lot of strong red wine, Tesco's finest, and probably I talked too long about how difficult it had been to lay the patio flags in just the right way. She kept looking over my shoulder towards Patrick, who was sharing a joke with Sarah-Jane and our guests. Her lack of attention was worse than irritating, it was downright rude. I found myself wanting to get under her skin, to provoke her into some sort of response. Any response.

"I ought to make a confession," I said, wiping a smear of tomato

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ketchup off my cheek with a paper napkin. "Ease my conscience, you know? This has been preying on my mind for years."

"Oh yes?" She raised a languid eyebrow.

"Yes," I said firmly. "It's about you and me."

She contrived the faintest of frowns, but a frond of Virginia creeper, trailing from the pergola, seemed to cause her more concern. She flicked it out of her face and murmured, "You and me?"

I covered my mouth to conceal a hiccup, but I'm not sure she even noticed. "Well, I don't know whether you ever realised, when we were in the sixth form together, I mean, but I had a thing about you. Quite a serious thing."

"Oh," she said. That was all.

I'd hoped to intrigue her. Over-optimistic, obviously. Never mind, I'd started, so I would finish. "You're a very attractive woman, Olivia. Patrick's a lucky fellow."

"You think so?"

I leaned towards her, stumbling for a moment, but quickly regaining my balance. "Yes, I do think so. He thinks people are like cars. In my book, you're a high-performance model."

She peered into my eyes, as if seeing them for the first time. "Your wife's prettier than I remembered. I might have known."

That was all she said. *I might have known?* I stared back at her, puzzled, but before I could ask her what she meant, a strong arm wrapped itself around my shoulder and Patrick's voice was in my ear.

"Now then, Terry. You'll be making me jealous, monopolising my lovely wife all the time."

I could smell the alcohol on his breath, as well as a pungent aftershave. And I could hear Sarah-Jane's tinkling laughter as he spoke again.

"Always did have an eye for a pretty lady, didn't you?"

The next time we got together, for a meal at an Indian restaurant a stone's throw from the showroom, Patrick offered Sarah-Jane a job as his PA. I'm not sure how it came about. One moment they were talking idly about her plans to return to work the following week, the next Patrick was waxing lyrical about how someone with her administrative skills could play a vital role in his business. He needed a right-hand woman to rely on, he said, and who better than an old friend?

I glanced at Olivia. She was sitting very still, saying nothing, just twisting her napkin into tight little knots, as if it was a make-believe garrote. Her gaze was fixed on her husband, as usual, as if the rest of us did not exist.

I assumed that Sarah-Jane would turn him down flat. In the estate agency, she was deputy to the branch manager and stood in for him when he was on holiday. There was a decent pension

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scheme, too. But to my amazement, she positively basked in his admiration and said she'd love to accept. It would be a challenge, she said merrily, to keep Patrick on the straight and narrow. Before I could say a word, Patrick was summoning the waiter and demanding champagne. One look at my wife's face convinced me it was a done deal. Even though nothing had been said about salary, let alone sick pay or holiday entitlements.

At least I need not have worried on those counts. Within a couple of days, Patrick hand-delivered her letter of appointment. The terms were generous; in fact, her basic rate was a tad higher than mine. When I pointed this out, Patrick was firm.

"I'm sure she's worth it, Terry. And to be honest, I'm a demanding boss. I work long hours and spend a lot of time travelling. I'll need Sarah-Jane by my side. She'll be my right hand, so I'm prepared to pay a premium."

I shot my wife a glance. "I don't think . . . "

"It'll be fine," she said, patting me on the hand. "A new environment, a fresh start. I can't wait."

"But don't you think . . . I mean, after having so long at home . . . ?"

"I'm ready," she said. "I've gathered my strength. You're sweet to me, darling, but I don't expect to be wrapped in cotton wool for the rest of my life."

"Don't worry," Patrick said to me. "I'll take good care of her."

I can't put my finger on one single incident that caused me to believe that Patrick and Sarah-Jane were having an affair. My brain didn't suddenly crash into gear. The suspicion grew over time. Like when you begin to hear a faint knocking each time your well-loved car rounds a corner at speed. At first you don't take any notice; after a while you can't ignore the noise altogether, but you persuade yourself that it's nothing, really, that if you don't panic, sooner or later it will go away of its own accord. But it never goes away, of course, not ever.

Little things, insignificant in themselves, began to add up. She started to wear raunchy underwear again, just as she had done in those exciting days when we first got together. To begin with, I was thrilled. It was a sign she was putting the miscarriage behind her. But when I turned to her in bed at night, she continued to push me away. She was tired, she explained, the new job was taking so much out of her. It seemed fair enough, but when I suggested that it was unreasonable for Patrick to propose that she accompany him for a week-long trip to Edinburgh, to meet people from a life-insurance company he did business with, she brushed my protests aside. The long hours came with the territory, she said. Patrick had given her a wonderful opportunity. She could not, would not let him down.

Even when she was at home, she was never off the mobile, talk-

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ing to him in muffled tones while I busied myself in another room. Client business was highly confidential, she reminded me when I ventured a mild complaint. I suggested several times that the four of us might go out for another meal together, but it was never convenient. Olivia wasn't well, apparently. Although Sarah-Jane was discreet, I gathered that her old rival was seeing a psychiatrist regularly. I said that maybe Patrick would want to spend more time with his own wife, but Sarah-Jane said I didn't understand. There was a reason why my old friend buried himself in his work. He didn't need the money, it was all about having a safety valve. A means of escape from the pressures of being married to a neurotic cow.

One night Sarah-Jane announced that she would have to be up at the crack of dawn the next morning to catch the early flight to Paris. Patrick thought the European market was full of opportunities and they were going to spend forty-eight hours there. Putting out feelers, making contacts.

"Are you taking the camera?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Won't have time for that. You don't realise, Terry, just what it's like. This is high-powered stuff, but it's hard work. Long meetings in offices, talking business over lunch and dinner. One hotel is much like another, it's scarcely a tourist trip."

"Your mobile always seems to be busy or switched off when I call."

"Exactly. It's nonstop, I can tell you. I really don't want to be disturbed. And don't fret about the phone bill, by the way. Patrick pays for everything, of course he does."

An hour later, her mobile rang again. At one time I'd liked the "I Will Survive" ringtone; all of a sudden I hated it. While she retreated to the kitchen to take the call, closing the door behind her, I did something rather dishonourable. I crept up the stairs in my stockinged feet and opened up the suitcase she'd been packing. There were new shoes I didn't recognise, clothes with designer labels that I'd never seen before. Along with furry handcuffs, a velvet blindfold, and a whip.

When at last she came off the phone, I didn't say a word about what I'd discovered. Only for a few seconds had I contemplated a confrontation. But I couldn't face it. Suppose I challenged her and she admitted everything? Said that she loved Patrick and that, compared to him, I was nothing?

How could I deny it? Lucky Patrick, he won every time.

All through their absence in Paris, I felt numb. At the showroom, I was going through the motions, scarcely caring when a customer reckoned he could beat my price by going to the dealership on the other side of town. One lunchtime, when Bernard passed me the

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latest copy of *What Car?*, I left it unopened on the table while I nibbled at a chicken tikka sandwich and stared moodily through the glass at the drizzle spattering the windscreens of the saloons on the forecourt. Bernard asked if I was all right and my reply was a noncommittal grunt.

Of course I wasn't all right, my wife and best friend were betraying me. Worse, they were treating me like a fool. At once I saw that really, it had always been like this. Patrick used people and discarded them like he used and discarded his cars.

And I meant to do something about it.

I still hadn't decided what to do when Patrick dropped Sarah-Jane off at home that evening. I'd seen his car pulling up outside the gate and I'd wandered down the path to greet them. Good old Terry, I thought to myself as I forced a good-natured wave. Always reliable.

"Good trip?"

"Fine," Sarah-Jane said. I don't think I'd ever seen her red hair so lustrous, her skin so delicate. "Hard work, obviously."

"No peace for the wicked," Patrick confirmed with his customary grin. "I don't know what I'd do without my trusty PA . . ."

"Taking things down for you?" I interrupted, with as much jocularity as I could muster.

"Absolutely."

He roared with laughter, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sarah-Jane start. When she thought I wasn't looking, she shot Patrick a cautionary glance, but he wasn't fazed. The worm—I *knew* he thought this—was incapable of turning.

In bed that night, for the first time in an age, she reached for me. I sighed and said I was tired and turned away. Even though I still wanted her so much, I would not touch her again until I knew she was mine forever.

The truth dawned on me a couple of days later. I couldn't sort this on my own. I needed help, and only one person could provide it. But I'd need all my sales skills. Before I lost my nerve, I picked up the phone and rang the number of Patrick's house. I held for a full minute before someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Olivia? It's me. Terry. We need to talk."

"What about?" Her voice was faint. I could tell she was at a low ebb.

"I think you know."

There was a long pause before she said, "So you finally worked it out."

"I suppose you think I'm an idiot, a poor naive idiot?"

I could picture her shrugging. "Well . . ."

"Like I said, we ought to talk."

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"What for? You seriously imagine I'm going to cry on your shoulder? Or let you cry on mine?"

"I want you to come here, to the showroom." I wasn't going to be swayed by her scorn. Suddenly, I had never felt so masterful. "We have to do something."

Another pause. "Do something?"

"I'll see you at reception at three o'clock. Pretend you're a customer. I'll take you on a test drive and we can decide."

Looking out through the glass windows as Olivia arrived in her Fiat runabout, Bernard recognised her and shot me a sharp glance. I smiled and said, "I finally persuaded Patrick to cough up for his wife's new car. She was ready for a change."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh yes? Well, take care, young man. She's a loose cannon, that one."

"The two of us go back years," I said. "I can handle her. No worries."

Five minutes later, Olivia was at the wheel of a new fiery orange supermini. Lovely little motor, alloy wheels, sill extensions, and a tiny spoiler above the tailgate, plus bags of equipment for the money. From the styling, you would never guess it was designed in Korea. But this afternoon, I wasn't interested in selling a car.

"Sarah-Jane isn't the first, is she?" I asked as we paused at a red light.

"So you finally realised?"

"This is different from the others, isn't it?"

"What makes you think that?" Her voice was empty of emotion. I didn't have a clue what was going on in her head.

"Because I know Sarah-Jane. She lost him once, she won't let him slip away again. It's only now that I see the truth. She's been grieving for him for years. He was what she wanted, not me."

She kept her eyes on the road. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps this is different."

"You've picked up hints?"

"The others never lasted this long. I always knew he would come back to me in the end. This time . . ."

We moved onto the dual carriageway, picking up speed as we moved out of town.

"What can we do about it?" I asked. "How can we stop them?"

"Is that what you want, to stop them?"

"Of course. Does that surprise you?"

"He could always twist you around his little finger, Terry. I thought—you were willing to put up with it. As long as you thought he was making money on your investments, as long as he kept flattering you, made you feel like a big man."

It wasn't the longest speech, but then, I don't think I'd ever heard her put more than three sentences together at one time before.

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"I don't care about the money," I said hotly.

"That's just as well, because there won't be as much for you as you'd like to think. The business is going down the tube."

"What?"

Her knuckles were white against the steering wheel. "He's always been lazy and now he doesn't have time for anyone or anything but your wife. The creditors are pressing, Terry. Better watch out, or they'll take your money as well as his."

I didn't speak again for a couple of minutes, I just gazed out of the window, watching the pylons in the fields, their arms outstretched as if denying guilt. Until then, I suppose I'd had pangs of conscience. I'm not a naturally violent man. In principle, I think it's right to turn the other cheek. But there are limits, and I had raced past mine.

"You can stop him," I said eventually. "That's why I needed to talk to you, Olivia. Not to weep and wail. I just want an end to it."

Ideas were shifting inside my head, even as I sat beside her. I hadn't been thinking straight. I'd thought: *What if she kills herself?* It wasn't nice, but looking at it another way, you might say it was only a question of time before Olivia stopped crying for help and finally went all the way. Imagining the headlines gave me grim satisfaction. *Faithless Financier Finds Wife Dead. Betrayed Woman Could Not Take Any More.* It would finish everything between Sarah-Jane and Patrick. Their relationship would be tainted for all time. I knew enough of him to be sure he would want to get out of it, make a new beginning with someone else. Someone else's wife, most likely.

But maybe there was a different solution, leaving less to chance. Bernard's words lodged in my brain. He was no fool, he had Olivia's number. She *was* a loose cannon, they didn't come any looser. What if she was fired at Patrick himself?

Signs were scattered along the grass verge warning of police speed enforcement, pictures of so-called safety cameras and a board bragging about how many poor old motorists had been caught exceeding the limit in the past six months. None of it seemed to register with Olivia. The yellow camera wasn't hidden from view, there was no panda car lurking in the bushes, she had every chance to slow down before we reached the white lines on the road, but far from easing off the accelerator, she put her foot down. We leapt past the camera and it flashed twice in anger. I couldn't help wincing, but at the same time I felt blood rushing to my head. This was a sort of liberation. I was manoeuvring Olivia as if she was a car to be squeezed into a tight parking space. And Patrick's luck was about to run dry.

"He deserves to suffer," she said.

"Yes."

She tossed me a glance. It was gone in a moment, but for the first

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time since I'd known her, I thought she was actually *seeing* me. But I still couldn't guess what she thought about what she saw.

"Olivia loves the special edition," I told Bernard. "I offered her the chance to take it home, try it out for twenty-four hours before she signs on the dotted line. The insurance is fine, she's not a time-waster, trust me."

He gave me the sort of look you give delinquents on street corners, but said nothing. No way could he guess the thoughts jockeying inside my head. My voice was as calm as a priest's, yielding no hint of the excitement churning in my guts.

I had made a sale, the biggest of my career.

Olivia had told Patrick she'd be out shopping all day. She was sure he'd have seized the chance, taken Sarah-Jane home so that the two of them could romp in the comfort of the king-size bed. She was going to drive straight home and catch them out.

What weapon would she choose? From our visit to their lovely house, I remembered the array of knives kept in a wooden block on the breakfast bar. And there was a cast-iron doorstop, a croquet mallet, the possibilities were endless.

Pictures floated through my mind as I shuffled through price lists for gadgets and accessories. Patrick's damaged face peeping from out of the covering sheet in the mortuary. Solemn policemen, shaking their heads. Sarah-Jane, pale and contrite, kissing my cheek. Whispering the question: Could I ever forgive her?

Of course I could. I'm not a cruel or bitter man. I'd promise her that we would work at the marriage. Pick up the pieces.

Patrick was right about one thing, I decided. People *are* like cars. They just need the right driver.

My mobile rang. I keyed Answer and heard Olivia. Breathless, triumphant.

"So easy, Terry, it was so easy. They were on the drive outside the porch. Kissing, they only had eyes for each other."

"You—did it?"

She laughed, a high, hysterical peal. "It's like nothing else. The feeling as your wheels go over someone. Crushing out the life—*squish, squish.* The screams urge you on. I felt so empowered, so much in control. But I reversed over the body, just to make sure."

"So . . ."

I heard her gasp and then another voice on the line. A voice I never wanted to hear again. Frantic, horrified.

"Terry, you put her up to this, you bastard. You jealous, murdering bastard."

It was Patrick, Lucky Patrick.

My mind stalled, useless as an old banger. I couldn't take this in, couldn't comprehend what Olivia had done. If Patrick was alive—what had happened to Sarah-Jane? ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

by Paul Halter

Translated from the French by John Pugmire and Robert Adey

"Daddy, Daddy, tell us a story."

The chieftain looked at the little group that was devouring with gusto the deer that had been killed a few hours before. He pricked up his ears and glanced in exasperation at his son.

"Yes, Daddy, please," insisted another of his children.

"Another one?" he growled. "You'd do better to occupy yourselves with more important things! You're old enough to hunt now. The winter's been hard and spring is still a long way off. How many times do I have to tell you that to live you have to eat, and to eat you have—"

"Yes, we know, but please, Daddy, please tell—"

"Now you're bothering me! I don't know what else to tell!"

His companion trotted through the snow to rub herself against him: "You can tell them the story of Wolf."

"The story of Wolf!" he bristled. "But they're much too young."

"Yes, tell us the story," his turbulent offspring clamoured in unison.

He bared his teeth in anger, but he soon relented; he knew that, one way or another, he would not be able to escape the daily chore. And after all, if they were old enough to hunt, they were old enough to know.

We try not to repeat authors in Passport to Crime so that we may bring as many different voices to you, from as many countries, as possible. But Paul Halter's stories have a special combination of atmospheric setting and brilliant classical plotting that makes them irresistible. A Frenchman from Alsace Lorraine whose most famous fictional protagonist is an Englishman called Dr. Alan Twist, Mr. Halter appears in our pages here for the third time.

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He gazed for a long time at the plain covered in snow and, in the distance, the dark line of the pine trees bowing to the wind. With his red eyes fixed on his sons, he began:

"It's a very sad story. Most among us claim that 'those things' only exist in the minds of a few crazy creatures. Unfortunately, it's not true. Wolf was a friend . . ."

The snow was falling in large flakes on Malmort, a small town in the Lorraine, nestled in lonely isolation in the foothills of the Vosges. The sad gray houses that clustered around the church seemed gradually to become engulfed by the thick white blanket, as if seeking to be forgotten: to blend into a landscape more desolate here than in the rest of the Lorraine. Even the mountain range itself, a twisted rock barrier dotted with firs, appeared to loom more ominously in this part of the region than anywhere else. It was only eight o'clock at night, yet already the inhabitants had locked and bolted their doors. Terror, rather than the rigors of winter, was what chilled their hearts. Only two days had gone by since the murder of old Pierre Wolf. A particularly grisly murder, yet—curiously—it was not so much the ferocity of the crime that worried the villagers, but what it implied. *"He* is back," they could be heard whispering. *"Mon Dieu,* what will become of us? Our women? Our children?"

Commissaire Jean Roux, in charge of the investigation, had hardly slept since the tragedy. That evening, he was pacing up and down in front of the fireplace, racking his brains for any glimmer of a solution to the extraordinary puzzle, when someone knocked on the door.

He went to open it. An old man of smallish stature stood there, covered in snow and obviously numb with cold, claiming to be lost and looking for an inn in which to spend the night. A short while later, sitting in front of the fire with a stiff grog, he explained to his host the circumstances that had led him to lose his way. Totally preoccupied, the policeman only listened with one ear. One phrase, however, caught his attention:

". . . There's always an explanation for everything."

Jean Roux studied the visitor carefully. His gnarled and twisted hands and his face like parchment spoke of a great number of years on this earth. His eyes, by contrast, were striking for their sparkling vitality, youth, and intelligence. Roux was unsure what to make of him. Where had this old man come from anyway? Why had he been wandering out in the open at this time of night, in the swirling snow? His clothes appeared to be of good quality; there was nothing of the tramp about him. The detective began to regret not having paid enough attention to what he had been saying. But good manners prevented him from asking his companion to repeat his words.

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"For everything? Do you really believe that?" he remarked with a disillusioned smile. "Monsieur . . . Monsieur . . . ?"

"Dieudonne. Noel Dieudonne. Yes, I believe there *is* always an explanation for everything."

Jean Roux shook his head disapprovingly as he stared at the wolfhound sleeping on one corner of the carpet. M. Dieudonne frowned.

"Would there be a connection between that animal and your reluctance to believe?"

"Yes, in a way. I took in this hound because his master was murdered nearly two days ago. And there isn't an explanation for the death of that man. No 'rational' one, at least. It has been proven that only this beast could have been responsible, but it's beyond the bounds of credibility that it could have administered the fatal dagger wound."

"The animal looks harmless enough to me, in spite of its size," M. Dieudonne observed calmly.

"I think so, too, even though the body of his master, M. Wolf, was lacerated by claw and fang marks."

The old man looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Stabbed, bitten, and slashed? What kind of a monster . . ."

"Have you ever heard tell of the *werewolf,* my dear sir?" asked the policeman.

The visitor looked at him incredulously.

"There's always an explanation for everything, you say," Jean Roux continued bitterly, and with a note of sarcasm. "I think you'll change your mind after I've told you what happened the night before last, as well as certain events which occurred about twenty years ago. One of the two people who discovered the victim is none other than my predecessor, ex-Commissaire Maurice Mercier. A level-headed witness, in other words, with a trained eye.

"It had snowed the night Wolf was killed, between nine o'clock and midnight. It was a little after that when Mercier was awakened by shrieks and growls. Then, around one o'clock, there was a knock at the door. It was his old friend and neighbour Dr. Loiseau, standing there with a torch in one hand and his walking stick in the other, come to ask him whether he had heard screams coming from the forest. Anxiously, and for good reason, they went straightaway to Pierre Wolf's house.

"Mercier and Loiseau both lived practically at the edge of the forest. They only had to follow a path through the woods to reach Wolf's house, which was situated in the middle of a clearing. A house made entirely of wood, with a carpenter's workshop adjoining, although Wolf had not set foot in the shop for several years, having given up his hobby.

"It was not long after one o'clock that Dr. Loiseau and Mercier reached the clearing. A thin coat of fresh snow covered the frozen

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ground all around. The beam of Dr. Loiseau's lamp picked out a strange set of prints which appeared to originate in the Wolf house, standing about fifty yards ahead of them. They were not the footprints of a human, but of a large dog—or a wolf!

"Almost indistinguishable under the trees and bushes, the prints finally petered out quite close to them, not far from the path. In the light of the lamp they traced the prints back, which led them to the front entrance of Wolf's house, open in that weather and at that late hour! They found Wolf slumped in front of the fireplace, swimming in his own blood, a dagger planted in his back and his face and limbs lacerated with slashes. The body was still warm. Dr. Loiseau estimated that death had occurred within the half-hour, forty minutes at most, which placed it at about twelve-thirty. An assessment confirmed later by the medical examiner. Do you see the problem? The crime occurred *after* the snow stopped. Now, apart from their own and those of the 'beast,' no other footprints were found anywhere around the house—which they searched from top to bottom, only to prove that nobody was there, other than themselves and the victim. Even the victim's wretched dog had disappeared. They were probably its prints that they had noticed outside, and while it may have been responsible for the vicious attack on its master, under no circumstances could it have stabbed him with a dagger. How, then, had the murderer escaped without leaving a mark in the snow?"

M. Dieudonne nodded his head, deep in thought. He drained his grog, savoring the last drop, then declared:

"Interesting. But how much time had elapsed before your arrival on the scene?"

Commissaire Roux smiled ironically as he answered:

"I understand what's behind your question. Actually, we got there very quickly. Dr. Loiseau came immediately to find me, leaving Mercier to stay with the victim. It's the business about the footprints that intrigues you, isn't it? I can assure you that was where we focused our attention, because Dr. Loiseau had pointed out their curious nature straightaway. It just so happened that among my officers there was a specialist in that area, who knows more than an Apache Indian about the tricks that can be played. None of the sets of tracks had been tampered with. Not those of the 'beast,' not Mercier's, not Dr. Loiseau's. Nobody had marched backwards, nobody had covered anyone else's prints with his own. And I repeat, there were no other prints around the house, nor anywhere on the snow-covered surface of the clearing. We also went through Mercier's house with a fine-toothed comb. Nothing, and—needless to say—no secret passages. Are you beginning to get the picture?"

"It certainly limits the possibilities. What did the medical examiner have to say about the wounds?"

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"He was fairly cautious. Wolf's face and hands had been shredded, not bitten; in fact, there were no marks anywhere that could be said with absolute certainty to be bite marks. It was the work of a wild animal, there's nothing more to be said. As for the dagger wound in the back, that was without question the work of a human. A precise blow, straight to the heart, causing instantaneous death."

M. Dieudonne thought for a moment, then pointed to the wolfhound sleeping on the carpet. "When and where did you find him?"

"He reappeared during the morning. We examined him carefully, of course. He seemed to have been in a fight, but there was nothing to show whether it had been with his master or another animal in the area. The problem is there had been another fall of snow since the night, so we couldn't compare his prints to those leaving the front entrance of the house."

"But those prints must have been made by the dog, surely?"

"Perhaps. But in that case, what about the murderer? A winged assassin, not subject to the laws of gravity, do you think? Whether it was this beast or some other animal that shredded his master's body doesn't affect the problem, as I see it! How could whoever had struck the fatal blow have escaped? By the way, this dog doesn't strike me as being particularly aggressive . . . Otherwise, believe me, I wouldn't be keeping him here."

There was a silence, broken by M. Dieudonne asking:

"Apart from what you've told me, are there any other clues?"

"Clues? No. There was something bizarre, however, although I can't see what it could have to do with the murder. On the bench in the workshop there were some fresh wood shavings, which apparently had come from a lath that had been removed from the roof, and which we found on one of the shelves, the only bit of freshly cut wood in a place covered with dust and cobwebs."

"That's certainly bizarre. But what's even more bizarre is the conclusion you seem to have drawn from all this. If I've understood you correctly, you think M. Wolf's killer was half-man, half-wolf, in other words a werewolf, which would explain the claw marks and the bites, as well as the dagger and the prints in the snow."

Jean Roux nodded, somewhat shamefacedly.

"I assume, my dear sir, that you must have good reasons for making such an assumption?"

The commissaire's face darkened and his voice dropped.

"You're not from these parts, I take it? You don't know about the legend that hangs over this village. The werewolf has always haunted this region. A monster, half-man half-wolf, as you say, which has its own particular way of killing its prey: tearing the flesh apart with its fangs before plunging a dagger into the heart. About twenty years ago, nothing had been heard of the werewolf

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for some time. Then, out of the blue, it struck twice. Old Timothee saw it with his own eyes when it attacked Henri, the little boy he had adopted and who, by some miracle, survived. The old man's dog, like his master, tried to defend the child against the monster and followed it into the forest, where it was found in agony, its body lacerated by dagger thrusts. Incidentally, the tragedy was seen by another witness, none other than Dr. Loiseau, whose own wife would be a victim of the beast a week later."

For a few seconds, the only sound to be heard was the crackling of the fire. The two men stared sightlessly at the sleeping wolfhound. The smooth and shiny fur of its flank rose and fell steadily with the rhythm of its breathing.

It was Roux who broke the silence:

"Have you any *other* explanation to offer, my dear sir?"

The old man avoided the question.

"You told me that M. Mercier and Dr. Loiseau went to M. Wolf's house because they had reason to be concerned. I don't really understand that. Admittedly they both heard growls coming from the forest, but that was hardly reason enough for a nocturnal excursion. Especially since the werewolf had not been seen for about twenty years!"

"Obviously," replied Jean Roux, turning his armchair around. "It wasn't only the noises which caused them to be concerned about old Wolf. Several days before the tragedy, Mercier and Loiseau had spent the evening with him. Henri was there, too. Yes, the very same Henri who had been attacked by the beast in the past. This kind of get-together was unusual, quite exceptional, in fact, because Wolf had lived practically as a recluse since he had stopped working. I say since that time, because before then he had been a busy bee, dipping into every flower. He was an unrepentant skirt-chaser, to the point that he had no friends left among the males of the village, a state of affairs which had made him bitter and even hateful. Although surprised by the invitation, Mercier and Loiseau accepted, assuming that the hermit's life was beginning to weigh on him. And that night, the discussion turned to the werewolf."

Roux stopped and looked his visitor in the eye to get his full attention.

"I imagine you are well aware that the werewolf is a human of normal appearance, male or female, who only turns into a wild beast during certain nights. Are they complete transformations? Are they partial? Are they frequent? Do they only happen at full moon? I'm not going to dwell on the subject, which is in any case very controversial. As is the way to combat them. Only silver bullets that have been blessed and marked with the cross are supposed to be effective. The question of the 'transmission' of the evil is of particular importance, in my opinion. Some believe that a

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simple bite is sufficient to give birth to a new 'wolf.' Then there is also the question of what symptoms allow us to identify our werewolf when he is not in a period of transformation. They say that, despite the human appearance, two things can betray him. First, his body will show the marks of any wounds and any scratches sustained during his wild wanderings in the forest. Second, there will be hairs on the palm of his hand. Mercier, Loiseau, and Wolf were discussing the matter when the conversation became quite heated. It was about Henri, in fact, who had actually been bitten by the monster, and who had suffered the consequences. He's a good and honest lad, but he has the mental age of an eight-year-old. In the village, he is called upon to perform only the most menial tasks, at which he often incurs cuts and scratches. He has no hairs on his palm, but his body and arms are covered in a veritable fleece. It's not difficult to guess the drift of the discussion: Henri, having been bitten by the monster, must surely run the risk of becoming a werewolf one day. Mercier and Loiseau pressed the point and that, apparently, riled Wolf. He suddenly announced, with a sneer, that the time had come to tell Henri the 'truth'; and not just Henri but the whole village. What truth was he talking about? The doctor and the ex-policeman failed to get it out of him, but they formed the distinct impression that Wolf was intent on pouring derision on the werewolf legend. They pointed out that his attitude might cause him grief if the werewolf got wind of what he was saying. Whereupon there was a minor incident: Dr. Loiseau made a sudden movement; the dog had an unfortunate reaction and bit him in the ankle. Nothing serious, but afterwards Loiseau had been obliged to walk with a cane for a few days. From that moment, things went from bad to worse, not helped by the amount of alcohol that had been consumed. Mercier and Loiseau left, threatening the old man with another visit from the monster, in view of his cynical disdain. Wolf, sarcastic and sneering, kept repeating that everyone would soon learn the truth."

Once more, M. Dieudonne nodded his head approvingly in amusement and satisfaction.

"Very well," he said after a while. "So we're dealing with a werewolf. A werewolf that visited M. Wolf by night and killed him with bites and a blow from a dagger before exiting the house, leaving behind his footprints in the virgin snow. All we need to do is to find his identity, the human face behind which he is hiding. Have you an idea? Any suspects? Personally, I would lean towards one of the three people with him that night. And you?"

Jean Roux cleared his throat.

"Yes, I'm also suspicious of those three. Particularly since none of them has an alibi. At the time of the crime, in other words around twelve-thirty, Mercier and Loiseau were both at home alone, and Henri was sleeping it off in a barn after an anniversary

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dinner for the farmer who employs him. Regarding Henri, I think I should tell you that all of Wolf's estate comes to him, so he inherits the house and any savings the old man had. Did Mercier and Loiseau have a similar motive for murder? I don't know. But I've always suspected that Mercier held a grudge against Wolf: It appears that his wife left him shortly after they came to live here. Could it be that she had an affair with Wolf and then, full of remorse, left the scene? All that is pure speculation, of course. And, as for Dr. Loiseau, all we have is conjecture. The doctor remarried after the tragic disappearance of his first wife. A happy and tranquil union, apparently, marred only by the poor state of health of the new Mme. Loiseau, who left us several years ago. Since then, he has lived alone, his only company a young dog, much sought after by the animal that you see lying in front of you."

Roux's voice trailed off, so surprised was he by the sudden change in the old man's expression, which had gone from a deep frown to a broad smile. He turned towards the policeman:

"We're looking for a monster and you talk to me about motives for murder? I have the impression that you are not as convinced as you would have me believe in the existence of this famous werewolf. M. Roux, I believe that, deep down, you have never really believed in the legend. And I still maintain there's always an explanation for everything."

"Am I to understand from what you say that you have solved the mystery? That you are in a position to explain how a human can cross an expanse of snow without leaving behind any trace other than that of an animal?"

"Yes," replied M. Dieudonne simply.

There was an icy silence.

"It's impossible," spluttered the commissaire. "I've studied the problem from every angle and—"

"Don't forget the wood shavings."

"The wood shavings! What the devil can they have to do with it? And the werewolf that attacked Henri nearly twenty years ago! Two witnesses saw it! How do you explain that?"

"The facts, M. Roux, just consider the facts! Try for a moment to empty your mind and reconstruct the scene from what is known: A young boy is found with serious bite wounds, and nearby is a dog writhing in agony from knife cuts. Who bit the young boy? The dog, clearly! And who took it on himself to stab the dog to death? The adult who was there at the scene, obviously, who wanted to put down the crazed animal who had attacked his adopted son.

"Old Timothee must have thought for a moment that little Henri was dead; that he hadn't been able to save him; and that he might even have struck him during his ferocious attack on his own dog. Beside himself with grief, weighed down by a sense of

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guilt, he felt he was losing his reason. It's not surprising that he regarded his dog as a sort of monster, nor that he started talking about the terrible beast of the legend.

"Once you accept that as the starting point, it's child's play to work out what happened next. I can only see one explanation for the lie that Dr. Loiseau told. As witness to the tragedy, he confirmed the old man's ramblings in order to be able to blame the werewolf for a crime that he had been planning for some time: disposing of his wife, who had deceived him with Wolf. The affair is pure speculation on my part; he may well have killed his first wife for some other reason. I also have the feeling that Henri is the fruit of another one of Wolf's amorous adventures. If we make that assumption, it explains a lot of what happened. If Wolf had been Mme. Loiseau's lover, he could well suspect that her death was actually a murder motivated by jealousy and that, in the shadow of the wild werewolf, there lurked the good doctor. If Wolf was the father of Henri, that would explain why he left him his estate and why he did not appreciate, at that notorious dinner, Mercier and Loiseau's assumption that Henri could be—or become—a werewolf. It must have been even more galling for him in view of what he suspected about Loiseau. No prizes for guessing why the doctor continued to foster the legend twenty years after. Wolf flew into a rage and let Dr. Loiseau know that he had discovered his secret and did not intend to keep quiet about it much longer, not realizing that, in doing so, he was signing his own death warrant.

"In order to get rid of Wolf without attracting suspicion, Dr. Loiseau needed to make it look like a new manifestation of the werewolf. So the following day, even though the wound inflicted by Wolf's dog was minor, he started walking with a cane. And a few days later, when a light snowfall was anticipated, he put his plan into action. That evening, as the snow started to fall, he walked to the clearing, taking with him his young dog, which he attached to a tree. He knocked on Wolf's door. He stabbed him and lacerated his skin with the same special tool he had used on his first wife some twenty years earlier. Then he went into the disused carpenter's workshop and fashioned a rudimentary pair of stilts from the roof lath, shaping the tips so that they matched the end of his cane. Or possibly he made them sometime before, even in the presence of Wolf, who was completely oblivious to the intended purpose of the stilts.

"The snow having stopped, the killer unleashed his dog and watched it hurtle towards the edge of the forest to meet its mate in joyful reunion—which was the cause of the noise that became 'shrieks and growls' in Mercier's words. In turn, the doctor himself left the scene on the stilts. Of course, these were not full-size stilts—which would have left widely spaced marks; in this case, the chocks which supported the feet were nailed close to the base of

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the stilts, in other words only a few inches from the ground, which would result in a very short stride and hence closely spaced marks in an almost straight line, similar to those made by a cane. After having released his dog, Loiseau alerted the ex-commissaire Mercier. Then, arriving on the scene in the company of his friend, he immediately shone his light on the dog's prints, while walking next to those left by the stilts, and pretending to press down on his cane.

"The policeman in charge of examining the prints did his job very thoroughly, I have no doubt. I'm sure he carefully examined all the prints left in the snow by Mercier, Loiseau, and the dog. But the marks left by the cane?"

The commissaire's ears were ringing and his brain was in a swirling fog. He could not believe it. This providential visitor had solved, in less than a quarter of an hour, a puzzle he had been racking his brains over for two days and almost two nights. He could only hear the voice off and on, in snatches:

"The fresh wood shavings were quite clear, after all . . . I kept telling you there's always an explanation for everything . . . Look! It's stopped snowing! I'll be on my way soon . . . No, doggie, down . . . Stay . . . You're staying here . . . What's his name, by the way?"

"Wolf," murmured Roux, "like his deceased master. I never understood why he called him by his own name."

"There's always an explanation for everything, my dear sir . . ."

Night started to fall. A few flakes of snow swirled in the biting cold. Nothing remained of the deer except the carcass lying in a pool of blood-red melted snow. Still, some of the group were not yet sated, but continued to feast on the last scraps of flesh, tearing at them with unabated ferocity.

"You understand," said the chief as he concluded the story, "that it was not the right solution."

"Personally," growled his eldest son, "I find the story grotesque. Particularly the bit about being transformed into half-man half-wolf."

"Unfortunately, my son, it happens. But in the opposite sense, naturally. That was precisely the case with Wolf. Because it was he, of course, who killed the old man during one of his many fits. I once saw him in that condition. You cannot imagine anything more hideous! He lost his beautiful fur and his paws lengthened and spread apart. His heavy furless head became round, his ears shrank, and his snout—I don't even want to think about it—almost disappeared. Truly a monster. But that's enough for tonight. We have to break camp."

A long howl rent the silence. At the chief's call, those who were still feasting withdrew their blooded snouts from the deer's entrails. And the pack disappeared into the depths of the forest. ●

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BRIEF NUDITY

by Ron Goulart

The official verdict was that he'd been doing a bit of late-night jogging along the beach and suffered a fatal heart attack. Not surprising in a man his age. Actually, though, Bud Hebberd had been running for his life and if he hadn't fallen dead, they'd have shot him down.

I'd encountered Bud for the first time in several years just three weeks earlier. I was standing there in the Wee Chapel of Eternal Rest in Santa Monica looking down at the closed coffin and reflecting on the fact that I had, unfortunately, reached the age where attending the wakes and funerals of my contemporaries was beginning to take up an increasing amount of my time.

Ron Goulart is well known for his work in several fiction genres, and he is also an expert on pulp-fiction magazines and comic strips. His history of adventure comic strips from the 1930s, *The Adventurous Decade,* was recently reprinted in a large trade paperback edition. His latest novel is *Groucho Marx, King of the Jungle* (St. Martin's).

Then, rather tentatively, someone slapped me on the back and spoke my name.

"You've held up better than I expected," he said as I turned to face him. "Not that many wrinkles and the hair looks to be all your own, buddy, in spite of that cornbread color you've got it dyed."

I frowned. The nasal voice sounded somewhat familiar, but I didn't immediately recognize the man. "Bud Hebberd?" I guessed after a few seconds.

Spreading his arms wide, he admitted, "The same."

Bud was at least forty pounds heavier than when he ran an animation studio that now and then turned out TV spots for the advertising agency where I was an account man. He didn't have hair anymore and he was obviously wearing contact lenses that weren't comfortable and caused him to blink quite a lot.

"Too bad about Gil," I said as we moved to the side of the little chapel and stood near a brand-new stained-glass window.

He made a noise that was part wheeze and part chuckle. "Once an adman, always an adman, right there with the appropriate cliché," he said. "Gil Jacobs was a second-rate photographer and a third-rate human being." He produced another wheezy chuckle. "If it hadn't been for his sideline, the guy would've starved to death years since."

"And how have you been, Bud?"

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"Lousy," he replied. "My life, as you should remember, took a serious downturn over twenty-five years ago." He sighed. "That was when Marina Bowen tossed me out on my ear."

"Hey, you should have recovered from that at least twenty-four years ago."

Scowling, Bud said, "You never were very imaginative. So you don't know, being such a stodgy upper-middle-class sort of fellow, what it feels like to have the love of your life turn against you for no apparent reason." Bud shook his bald head forlornly. "The trauma of that fateful parting, buddy, ruined my career as a serious artist and—"

"As I recall, it was actually a long series of saloon brawls that—"

"Admittedly," he admitted, "I drank for a brief period."

"Eleven or twelve years isn't exactly brief, Bud, even for old coots like us."

"Let's walk down to the beach," he suggested, taking hold of my arm. "The smell of all these damn wilting flowers is starting to—"

"I told somebody I'd meet him here."

"There's something important I want to discuss."

"Even so."

He lowered his voice. "Listen, I finally found out why Marina dumped me all those long years ago. And if it hadn't been for that son of a bitch lying in that casket yonder I never would've known."

My curiosity was, albeit only slightly, aroused and I allowed Bud to lead me out of the funeral home and into the misty early evening.

A thin grey fog was drifting in across the darkening Pacific. Bud, breathing heavily, said, "I better sit down for a minute." He settled, with a wheezy sigh, onto one of the benches along the seafront.

"We can head back inside if—"

"I'm okay. Just not up to long hikes."

"A block and a half isn't exactly—"

"I just want to catch my breath," he said. "Now, about Marina."

"Gil Jacobs told you something?"

"Not Gil directly, no," he answered. "I imagine what that jerk did was have a sort of deathbed conversion and became a nice guy for a short while before he kicked off. He instructed his attorney to turn this over to me." Fishing a small silver key from his coat pocket, he held it up. "Along with a—for him—apologetic letter."

"Safe-deposit box?" My legs were starting to ache slightly, so I sat down next to him.

Another raspy chuckle. "A commodious safe-deposit box in a California Trust Bank branch in Altadena." Dropping the key away, he gazed up into the foggy night. "Very illuminating, the contents. Only one of the folders applied to me, but Gil, as he was shuffling off to oblivion, wasn't thinking too clearly and he turned over all the files that have added so immeasurably to his livelihood over the years."

I asked, "You're implying that he was a blackmailer?"

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"That he was. In addition to being a jealous and duplicitous rat and a mediocre commercial photographer."

"He did some good work for my ad agency back—"

"Proving my point."

The fog was growing thicker and colder. "What did Gil say in the letter?"

After taking a few short breaths, Bud replied, "It was an apology. Yeah, he told me to look in the file he'd kept on me and I'd find out why Marina had given me the heave-ho. I don't know if you remember that Gil was also interested in her. Not that he had a chance."

"He showed her," I guessed, "some photographs."

Bud nodded. "Sent them to her, actually. You know how on cable at the beginning of every movie they put a warning? 'Adult content, adult language, mild violence, brief nudity.' That was my problem."

"Which? Adult content?"

"No, wise-ass. Brief nudity." He held up a forefinger. "Once, just only once while I was with Marina, I strayed and spent the night with another woman. A couple of hours at the All-Star Motel that used to be on Wilshire twenty-five years ago."

"Gil got pictures of that?"

"What I didn't know was that he was trailing me, trying to get something, anything, that'd make Marina break up with me," Bud said, wheezing some. "I didn't even know he was outside the side window using that film that doesn't need a flash. Inez Federman."

"Who?"

"Inez Federman, did commercials. She was the young housewife in the Farmer Fred's Smoked Sausage spots where her husband and repulsive offsprings all start howling for—"

"Nope, don't recall her. We never used her at our agency."

"I thought she had a terrific crush on me and one night when Marina went to a screening at the Writers Guild for some Italian tearjerker I didn't want to see, I ran into Inez at a joint on the Strip. Gil confessed in his letter that he'd hired her to lure me to that motel."

"And you allowed yourself to be lured, Bud."

"Inez was awfully cute." He shook his head, then sat up straighter. A smile touched his plump face. "Now here's what I intend to do."

"About what?"

"Marina and me. Haven't you been paying attention, buddy?" He frowned at me. "I'm going to tell Marina that Gil faked this whole thing. She's certain to—"

"You actually know where Marina Bowen is?" I asked. "She dropped out of movies a good fifteen years ago. And after doing thirteen episodes of that dreadful sitcom about a widow who inherited a circus, she disappeared from Hollywood."

"Well, no," he admitted, "I don't yet know where she's living now. I only got Gil's stuff today. But once I check with SAG and some of her

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old friends, I know I'll be able to track her down. Once I find her, I'll convince her that I was sabotaged by that louse over yonder." He pointed at the fog-enshrouded funeral home across the street where the neon sign was flashing a blurry *Eternal Rest* into the night.

Almost three weeks passed before I encountered Bud Hebberd again. Now and then I still do a consulting job for the advertising agency where I worked for over thirty years. They were co-producing a TV reality show tentatively titled *Elective Surgery.* It was felt that Dr. Vernon Noodleman, bestselling author of *Surgery Can Be Fun,* would make an ideal host. Noodleman felt otherwise, but since I'd worked with him back in the 1980s when he appeared in a series of TV spots for our Butch Masculine Deodorant account, it was thought that I might be able to persuade him where others had failed.

So I flew to Tucson two days after Gil Jacobs's wake and spent a week and a half cajoling Dr. Noodleman. I'd just about got him to agree to host *Elective Surgery* when the Creative Director at the agency faxed me at my hotel to inform me that the show was being retitled *So You Want a New Face* and they were actively pursuing a noted Chicago plastic surgeon for the hosting position.

Preoccupied as I was with pitching Dr. Noodleman, I pretty much forgot about Bud and his attempts to find his long-lost love.

On a smoggy Tuesday afternoon, over a week after I got back to L.A., as I was leaving the Sunset Strip office of my latest urologist, I noticed Bud, wearing a faded Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts that didn't much flatter his flabby legs, standing at the corner up ahead.

"How've you been?" I inquired, catching up with him.

"Wretched, miserable," he answered without looking at me, "frustrated, forlorn, downcast, depressed, morose—"

"Okay, enough," I cut in. "So what did Marina say when you found her?"

"I haven't found her." He pointed across the street at Moonbaum's Delicatessen. "Let me treat you to a plate of blueberry blintzes and I'll explain."

"I'm on a low-carb diet," I told him. "But I've got time for a decaf."

The signal changed and the roar of Jaguars, Mercedes, hybrids, SUVs, and a few lesser vehicles ceased. We crossed Sunset.

"Not a trace," said Bud. "Once a major actress, a noted Hollywoodite . . . vanished."

Inside the chill, highly air-conditioned deli, we found a booth and settled in. "I hear," I said, "that Groucho Marx used to eat here all the time."

"Sure, and George Washington slept in this very booth."

"Has it occurred to you that Marina Bowen might be deceased?"

"Am I a nitwit? Of course it occurred to me," he said. "I've gone on the 'Net and checked obits, hospital records, prison records, mental institutions. I've combed Yahoo, Google, Hoohaw, and sundry other

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search engines for mentions of Marina Bowen—also for Jane Borowitz, her real name. I found forty-three sites devoted to her old movies, ninety-two giving bio info, thirteen, if you can believe it, devoted to that abysmal *Running Away With the Circus* TV disaster. Two separate outfits are selling DVDs with 'all thirteen hilarious, gut-busting episodes.' Proving that there's no accounting for taste."

"So I've heard."

A waitress with the looks of a supermodel appeared beside our booth. "Any luck, Mr. Hebberd?"

"Still haven't found her, Mindy. I'll have the blueberry blintzes with sour cream *and* applesauce. Plus a Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray."

"And your distinguished friend?"

"Decaf."

"Would you like a side order of kosher dills?"

"Not at all."

Smiling abundantly, she departed.

Bud rested both elbows on the table. "There's not one bio site that takes her beyond 1990," he said forlornly. "There are speculations that she's living in New England with an ailing relative, that she entered a nunnery as a protest against the Gulf War, that she married me and we're living in an artists' colony in Taos, New Mexico."

"How about the Guild?"

"No address for Marina since 1990. And the agency that represented her—well, there's only one guy still there from back then and he has no idea where she is. The handful of her surviving friends haven't heard from her since she vanished from Los Angeles."

My coffee came and I stirred one packet of Splenda into it. "Were I you, Bud," I advised, "I'd take this as a sign from the Almighty. You're not meant to find her. Or to put it in nonmystical terms, if Marina is still in this world somewhere, she simply doesn't want to be found. By you or anybody else. Knowing when to quit is important."

"I'll find her." His blintzes arrived.

"How?"

Setting aside his blueberry-stained fork, Bud held up his left hand and commenced ticking off fingers. "One, I have just hired a top-notch, crackerjack investigative agency," he told me. "These lads are top seeded in the P.I. field. Three of them are former FBI agents, two are rumored to be ex-CIA, and the guy who's in charge of finding Marina for me has been fired from the LAPD for excessive zeal."

"An outfit on the Strip?"

"Yeah, I was just up—"

"Going to be expensive."

"It is, sure. No problem."

After sipping my coffee, I asked, "And what's two on your list?"

He retrieved his fork. "This'll appeal to the adman in you. Advertising. I'm going to be placing ads—full-page and half-page—in all the trades—*Hollywood Reporter, Daily Variety,* and such."

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"Also expensive."

"No problem," he repeated. "Each ad has a big headline—*Whatever Happened to Marina Bowen?* Then a few lines of concise copy saying that anyone knowing her whereabouts should contact Hubris Productions. That she's wanted for an important role in a new film budgeted at sixty million bucks."

"Might work," I conceded. "But I'm not clear on how you're going to pay for the private eyes and the trade paper ads."

"You forget, buddy, that I have Gil Jacobs's *complete* files," he reminded me in a lowered voice. "And some of his photos and documents, especially the most recent ones, are still quite useful."

I said, "Wait now, Bud. You aren't planning to take over his blackmail business?"

"For a while, sure," he said. "It's only fair. Gil was responsible for my losing Marina in the first place. Why shouldn't he help me pay for finding her again?"

"Here are some valid reasons," I offered. "It's damned dangerous. It's also illegal."

"His clients all did a variety of illegal stuff," Bud countered. "So basically I'm just punishing evildoers."

"Still a mistake, a big one."

He produced one of his wheezy chuckles. "I'll invite you to the wedding when Marina and I get married," he promised.

He didn't get around to that.

I never saw Bud alive again. For that matter, I never saw him dead, since there was a closed coffin at his wake. He did phone me a couple of times, so I have a fair idea of what actually happened to him. Of course, quite a bit of what I think went on is based on conjecture.

Bud's ads in the Hollywood trades began appearing the day after I ran into him on the Strip. Since he was an artist, they were nicely laid out and the typography was excellent. But a week later, they'd produced no positive results at all. Three different actresses of about the same age as Marina contacted him at his Hubris Productions e-mail address to suggest they could handle any role as well as she could and they had the advantage of being immediately available.

The prestigious private-investigation agency had made no progress toward locating her, though they assured Bud that they expected results in a very short time.

My wife and I make it a rule to play tennis at least twice a week at the country club in the beach town where we now reside. So when Bud called me the first time, I wasn't at home. After listening to the voice mail, I meant to call him back but we were expecting some people for dinner and I never got around to it.

Bud sounded dejected. "This is costing a stewpot of money. And I'm not any closer to finding her. But I know Marina and I are going to get together, so I sure as hell am not going to give up hope."

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In my view, something that hadn't happened in twenty-five years wasn't likely to happen at all. That's what I would've told him if I hadn't been distracted by helping my wife get the house ready for guests that night.

Bud's final call came about a week later, in the late afternoon. That one I was home for. "Success at last," he announced, wheezing slightly with excitement.

"Great. You found Marina?"

"Almost."

"Meaning?"

"It turns out Marina has a very good reason for lying low all these years."

"And it is?"

"That I don't know as yet, buddy, but it's something pretty big," he told me. "But she—and this really cheered me up—wants very much to see me again. Truth is, as might have been expected, she misses me, too, and is sorry we ever broke up."

"Who told you this?"

"A very close friend of hers," he said. "I'm going to meet this woman tonight and, if I can prove I really am Bud Hebberd, then she's going to take me to Marina's hideaway. I'm really excited about—"

"Where are you meeting this woman?"

"A secluded spot."

"Specifically where?"

"Well, don't mention this to anybody, especially the press," he requested. "It's that deserted amusement park down in San Amaro, place called Beachside Funland. In the parking lot in back of the place, you know, right along the water."

I sighed. "Bud, have you been carrying on Gil's blackmail sideline?"

After a few silent seconds, he said, "Yeah, I've had to, buddy. You know, to finance my quest."

"Seems to me if one of your disgruntled clients wanted to get you alone at an out-of-the-way—"

"C'mon, don't be paranoid," he told me. "This is completely legit."

"All right, let's hope so," I said. "And good luck."

"Good luck I'm already having," he assured me, and hung up.

They found him early the next morning, just as the day was starting, dressed in tennis shoes, a pair of chinos, and a blue pullover. Bud was sprawled facedown on the running path that stretched alongside the ocean. He was less than a quarter mile from the beachfront amusement park's parking lot.

There were some unexplained bruises on his face. But there was no doubt that he'd suffered a massive heart attack.

Bud had never done anything resembling exercise in his entire life. He sure as hell hadn't decided to start that night.

One of the people he'd been blackmailing, knowing about his obsession with Marina, had lured him to that quiet spot and tried to

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persuade him to tell where he'd stashed Gil Jacobs's blackmail files.

Bud had managed to break loose and start running along the beach. Before they caught up with him, he suffered his heart attack.

They left him there alongside the ocean. They took his keys—none were found on the body—and went to his place in Pasadena to hunt for the blackmail material. They must have found it, since nothing like that was among his effects.

That's what I think actually happened.

Bud's ads in the Hollywood trade papers had some posthumous success. For one thing, they got assorted media people thinking about Marina Bowen again. Three different studios contacted her agent to inquire if she'd be interested in an assortment of maternal roles, two outfits that staged nostalgia conventions wanted to sign her up, and both *Entertainment Tonight* and *60 Minutes* wanted to do segments about her and where she'd been all these years.

As it turned out, her surviving agent did know where she was. But Marina had long ago instructed him not to divulge her whereabouts to anyone. No exceptions. Even the detective agency Bud hired couldn't get it out of him.

Back in 1991 Marina had had what was most likely a serious breakdown. She managed to get herself to an out-of-the-way corner of Wyoming. When she recovered she decided she didn't want anything to do with show business ever again. She changed her name and devoted her life to watercolor painting and a modest bit of community service. Nobody in that particular remote corner recognized her. She had a considerable amount of money to finance her anonymity. However, when her agent contacted her to tell her about the renewed interest in her, Marina decided it was possibly time for a comeback. After a decade or more of dabbling in watercolors of Wyoming scenes, she felt it was maybe time to try Hollywood again.

I encountered her, by chance, at our country club on an overcast afternoon a month and a half after Bud had been laid to rest at a cemetery out in Glendale. She was about ten pounds heavier and had a few wrinkles. Her hair she'd been able to keep the same shade of auburn and, all things considered, she still looked pretty good.

I noticed her sitting at an outdoor table with two young and successful screenwriters, one of each sex, and a plump young woman who was an agent. Years ago I'd met her when she did some endorsement print ads for the agency. I crossed to the table and introduced myself. Then I said, "I was a friend of Bud Hebberd."

Marina touched at her hair with slender fingers. She frowned thoughtfully. "Bud Hebberd?"

"As I understand it, you and he shared a home together about twenty-five years ago."

The frown gradually faded. "Yes, that's right," she said finally. "I'd quite forgotten." ●

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BABA'S BITES

by Chris Simms

Lamb rogan josh. My favourite curry and, once you've got the basic spices, one of the easiest to make. Brown off your lamb cubes and put to one side. Add a generous glug of oil to a wide pan, put the heat on medium high, and throw in some cardamom pods, bay leaves, cloves, peppercorns, cinnamon, onions, ginger, and garlic. Stir for thirty seconds. Add cumin, coriander, paprika, and salt. Stir for another thirty seconds. Add the lamb, some yogurt, and a cup of water. Simmer for as long as you can resist.

After traveling throughout the world, Chris Simms settled near Manchester, England. He works as a freelance copywriter while also turning out psychological thrillers that have earned him comparison to Ruth Rendell and Mo Hayder. His novels to date are *Outside the White Lines*, *Pecking Order*, *Killing the Beasts*, and *Shifting Skin*, the latter scheduled for publication by Orion U.K. in July 2006.

I thought I had the curry sussed, until that night in Baba's Bites. Meat cooked until the strands barely hung together, yogurt and spices perfectly balanced, and some other ingredient that brought the dish springing to life. I thought of all the previous times I'd eaten it and knew I'd been stumbling around in the dark.

"Kaz," I said, hunched over the shallow polystyrene tray, prodding towards the riot of flavours with a plastic fork, "this is delicious. New cook or something?"

Kaz's brother usually prepared the curries, but I'd only had to smell this one to know it was in a different league. Kaz smiled as he sprinkled his homemade chili sauce over a doner kebab and held it out to the customer who stood swaying on my side of the little takeaway's counter.

"No, no, mate. I mean loads of chili sauce," the young bloke drunkenly said, trying to speak slowly and clearly for the benefit of what he thought were foreign ears. In a larger version of the action I'd just made with my fork, the customer jerked his hand up and down to demonstrate that he wanted the kebab to be drowned. The smile didn't leave Kaz's face as he soaked the open pita bread with gouts of fiery liquid.

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"Cheers, mate," said the customer, grabbing the paper-wrapped package and staggering out the door, leaving a trail of crimson drops behind him.

Kaz looked over at me and, with an accent that combined the nasal twang of Manchester with the thicker tones of the Middle East, said, "Yeah, mate. It's good, then?"

My mouth was too full for any spoken reply. Holding up a thumb, I nodded vigorously. Kaz looked pleased as he turned back to the huge hunk of processed meat slowly revolving on the oil-soaked spike. Flourishing a long knife, he began carving away at its outer layer.

Once I'd swallowed my mouthful I said, "So what's your brother doing, then?"

"Oh, he's pursuing a new business interest. He won't be around so much from now on."

The curry was too good for me to continue talking, so before tucking into it once more, I quickly said, "Well, compliments to the chef."

I'd dropped out of my chemical engineering degree halfway through my second year. There was no way I could imagine a career in it. Life, I decided, was too short to spend doing something you didn't enjoy. I sat down and tried to imagine a job that I would enjoy. Twenty-one years old, with a series of mind-numbing McJobs behind me and I was struggling. But during my gap year I went to Thailand (original choice, I know). Though I was far too much of a traveller ever to step inside Koh Samui's flashy tourist hotels full of mere holidaymakers, I watched the tour reps at work. I reckoned I could handle a life working in some of the most beautiful places on earth. Work it out for yourself: Manchester versus the Maldives. Britain versus Barbados. So a degree in Travel and Tourism it was.

Which left me with a new set of course fees rolled into almost two years of student debt. I got a night job in the baker's just down the road from my digs. "Mr. Wing's Chinese Bakers." There can't be many of those in Britain. But you wouldn't believe the amount of stuff he churns out. During the day, it's things like doughy rolls filled with sweet and sour pork, kung-po chicken, or special seafood mix; or batches of little buns sprinkled with sesame seeds and filled with chestnut purée or honey paste. At five o'clock, the day shift goes home, the front of the shop shuts, and the night shift appears round the back. While the rest of the country is slumped in front of the box, or enjoying themselves in pubs and restaurants, the output changes to speciality or "ethnic" breads as they're classed on the supermarket shelves. Pitas, naans, chapatis, lavache, ciabatta—all that stuff. The monstrous silver ovens never get the chance to cool down. Staff scurry around them, transporting away the steady flow of produce like worker ants carrying off the stream of eggs laid by their queen.

My coworkers chat happily away in languages from India, Asia, or Africa, but hardly any speak English. It's obvious most haven't

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got to Britain by legal means, either. The cash changes hands just before dawn, and unlike my rate of pay, theirs reflects the twilight world they operate in. The minimum wage doesn't even come into it. It's probably because I'm an official British citizen with a clean driving licence that I got the job of doing drop-offs. And, seeing as working next to a furnace half the night wasn't my idea of fun, that was fine by me. I deliver to city-centre takeaway joints that need more stock, or the Indian restaurants on Manchester's curry mile that prefer to serve freshly baked produce. They all know Mr. Wing's never shuts. The phone rings and I'm off in the little van with their order.

Baba's Bites called on my very first night. As soon as I wandered in with the tray of naans and pitas, Kaz spotted me for someone who was prepared to do a deal. And this is how it works: Kaz rings with an order, I pick what he wants from the racks of stuff in the storage room and swipe an extra tray or two. In return he gives me a free curry.

Baba's Bites—it's your typical late-night, city-centre takeaway place. A few stools and a narrow counter running along the plate-glass window at the front. Overflowing bin by the door. Rear of the shop partitioned off by a counter with a glass case on top. Underneath the warm panels of glass are stainless-steel dishes full of curry, lumps of sheek kebab on skewers, mounds of onion bhajis, savaloy sausages, and pakoras. Above the counter is a huge back-lit menu. A panel of photos showing juicy morsels which generally bear no resemblance to what gets handed over. Along the back wall is the inevitable kebab turning in one corner, a couple of hot trays for the meat Kaz skims off, a chip fryer, a hot plate for flipping burgers, a microwave for pizzas, a glass-fronted fridge full of cans, and a small sink (never used). In the other corner is the tiny hatchway through to the kitchen. Although you can hear the clatter of pans in the kitchen, you can't actually see into it—a hanging screen of multicoloured plastic strips ensures that. Kaz shouts through and a short while later whoever is doing the cooking presses a buzzer. Kaz then reaches in and picks up the next batch of burgers, sheek kebabs, or boiled rice. When I arrive, Kaz always scoops me a portion of lamb rogan josh, then passes it through the hatch for the extra coriander and sliced tomatoes that I like to be added.

Where Kaz was lucky—and why Baba's Bites does so well while countless other similar places just scrape by—is that less than a year ago a massive late-night bar and club opened opposite. Now he's assured of a steady flow of revellers being drawn across the road to the glow of his shop like moths to a flame. Unlike the melting pot of ethnic foods on sale, the clientele are mostly white, mostly male, usually in their twenties. Eyes bright, they burst raucously through the door, vying with each other at the counter, sometimes loudly critical of what's on offer, sometimes reverently

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appreciative like kids in a sweet shop. Who knows which way alcohol will tip them. As they wait for their orders they discuss all manner of topics. The standard ones of women in the club they've just left, how United or City are doing, the lack of black cabs. Sometimes it's stuff from the news—the state of the country's immigration system, scrounging asylum seekers, the flood of immigrants ruining the country. Even when they start to bitterly discuss "Pakis" or "ragheads," Kaz's smile remains unchanged as he plays the dutiful proprietor, quietly carrying out their commands. Serving them food from the very countries they curse.

To the left of Baba's Bites is a Slow Boat Chinese takeaway, on the other side a 24-hour Spar complete with bouncers to stop shoplifters escaping. After that is a dive of a pub. The rest of the row of shops on this stretch of the street consists of daytime businesses—dry cleaners, a newsagent's, and places like that. At the other end is a fish and chip shop which, for some reason, always shuts at around eight o'clock. The shutters are drawn down and padlocked long before I ever show up. Above the chip shop is a massage parlour. You'd miss it from the street, but in the alleyway round the back a discreet sign above the permanently open door leading up the stairs reads "Far Eastern Massage. Open 24 hours." I only know this because, when I arrive with a delivery for Kaz, I have to carry it up the alleyway to his shop's rear door.

As you'd probably guess from the swell of my belly, I'm not too fussy about my food. As long as there's enough of it. But I'm sure plenty of people happily gorging themselves at the front would spit it out in disgust if they could see the state of things round the back. The alleyway is narrow and it stinks. While the food places are open for business, the extractor fans sound like a collection of giant vacuum cleaners left permanently on. The grills pump out warm, grease-laden fumes that mingle with the sickly-sweet aroma of rotting food. The alleyway is littered with trays of all shapes and sizes dumped from the back doors of the shops. Most usually contain the remains of food: broken eggshells, mangled halves of oranges, or overripe tomatoes with skins that are split and weeping. Discarded twenty-five-litre drums of economy cooking oil sit piled next to empty beer barrels and crates of bottles from the pub. Industrial-size wheelie bins seem permanently stuffed to the top, the lids unable ever to close properly. Crowding round them are broods of bulging bin bags, haphazardly piled onto one another. Water pooled in the pitted surface of the alley is either a foul-smelling milky colour or tinged with a surface of glistening oil.

Kaz's door is like all the others—heavily metal-plated. He's spray-painted a large red 29 on it and I kick it twice to let whoever's in the kitchen know I've dropped off. I'm always back in the light cast by the lamps on the main road before the bolts go back and the cardboard trays vanish, dragged inside by, I presume, one

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of the kitchen assistants.

I found the note in about my eighth curry prepared by the new cook. Because I always have lamb rogan josh with extra coriander and freshly sliced tomatoes, she must have worked out it was the same customer asking for it each time. In fact, I was fairly certain that I was Kaz's only regular customer—the rest just stumble in because it's the first place they find serving food after coming out of the club. Most of them probably couldn't even remember what they'd eaten by the next day. I was halfway through my usual, watching with amusement as three lads attempted to cross the road. After about ten o'clock on a weekend, it seems, pedestrians, vehicles, and the watching police silently agree that daytime rules don't apply. Made impatient by booze, people will lurch out into the path of cars that instantly slow down or stop to allow them to cross. Similarly, cab drivers pull up whenever they like or make U-turns anywhere they fancy. The whole thing is a melee, yet, apart from the occasional slanging match, it seems to work.

The three lads had made it through the door and were debating about whether to go for doner kebabs or quarter-pounders when I bit on the strange object. At first I thought it was gristle—but it was too hard for that. An exploratory poke with my tongue revealed that it was something folded up. With a forefinger and thumb I extracted it from my mouth, sucking the remains of curry sauce from it as I did so. I held it up and saw that it was greaseproof paper, tightly folded. Carefully I opened it out and there, in the middle of the small square, were the words, "Help me. I am prisoner here."

I stared with puzzlement at the paper. Placing it carefully to one side, I decided to show it to Kaz once he'd finished serving the group at the counter. The first two had taken their burgers and wandered out onto the street. The third one waited at the counter, a twenty-pound note dangling from his hand. But as he was handed his order, the customer whipped the money from Kaz's reach and spun around to run for the door.

From the corner of my eye, I saw his two mates sprint away up the street. Until then, I'd only ever seen Kaz from the chest up. He was of a thickset build and I didn't think particularly agile. But he vaulted across that counter in a flash. The lad had bumped against the doorframe and lost a second as a result. Kaz sprang across the shop, grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him back to the counter in one movement. With his other hand he reached behind it and produced a baseball bat. He shoved it hard up against the customer's mouth, the wooden tip audibly catching on his teeth. A smear of blood appeared on his lips.

"Pay me," Kaz demanded, aggression lowering his voice to a growl. All traces of the amiable kebab-shop owner with a limited understanding of English had vanished and I looked at the muscles bunched in his shoulders and arms, knowing that he meant it.

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The prospect of imminent violence hung menacingly in the air and I felt a surge of queasiness in my stomach. Thankfully the customer quickly produced the note from the breast pocket of his Ben Sherman shirt. Kaz snatched it, walked him back to the doorway, and said, "'Night, then."

The lad walked shakily off up the street and Kaz returned to behind the counter. He looked at me and said, "Why do people have to be like that? I work hard all night, give him what he wanted, and he tries to rob me." He shook his head regretfully. "It's a bad world, Richard, a bad world out there." His eyes turned to the street and he gazed with sadness at the procession of people flowing past. Then, with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders, he picked up a ladle and began stirring the curries.

I couldn't believe how quickly he readopted his previous persona. It was like having a friendly dog snarl at you one moment, then wag its tail the next. Finding it hard to keep the same easy familiarity in my voice, I said, "You're right there." I looked at the piece of paper and, having witnessed this new side to him, decided against letting him see it.

Two nights later I was making a delivery at Baba's Bites again, but this time I had slipped my own note into the tray of naan breads. It read, "Who are you? Why are you a prisoner?"

Not knowing if I would ever get a reply, I banged on the back door and then went round to the front and stepped inside. "Same as usual?" asked Kaz, already spooning rogan josh onto a pile of rice.

"Yeah, cheers," I replied and sat down on my favourite stool in the corner. He handed the tray through the hatch and a few minutes later it was returned with a garnish of coriander and tomato. Shielding the food from him with one forearm, I sifted through the curry with my fork. A thrill of excitement shot through me when I found the little wedge of paper. Quickly I wrapped it in a serviette and slipped it into my pocket.

And so began a correspondence that would change my outlook on life forever. Over the next two weeks we exchanged a series of notes, mine written on lined sheets, hers scrawled in a microscopic hand on lengths of greaseproof paper. She'd write them at night, sacrificing valuable sleep to describe to me her plight. Her name was Meera and she was a seventeen-year-old Hindu girl from the war-torn region of Kashmir sandwiched uncomfortably between India and Pakistan. Her father and both brothers had died in the crossfire between militants and government troops. That left her as the eldest of four remaining daughters. After a long and tearful talk, she had persuaded her mother that the only way to prevent the family from becoming destitute was for her to leave the war-ravaged region and look for work. So they had paid almost all their savings to a man who promised to find Meera a well-paid job as a cook in an Indian restaurant in London. Abandoning her dream of

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a university place in Jammu to read law, she had climbed into the back of a lorry with seventeen other people and begun the slow trek overland to Britain. The group was occasionally allowed to emerge at night for a few minutes. Twice they transferred to other lorries—the one taking them on the final leg of the journey was the newest. They sat at its end, crammed in on all sides by crates of tulips. Eventually they were all dropped off at a house, herded inside, and the men and women separated. They were told they were in Britain, but certain arrangements still had to be made. After two days locked in a room with only a bucket for a toilet, some bottles of water, and a few loaves of bread, a different man kicked open the door. Meera was dragged out by her hair and told the cost of her passage to England had gone up. Her passport was taken off her and she was told that, to repay her debt, she could work in a brothel or a kitchen. Of course she opted for the kitchen and was bundled into the back of a van and driven to Baba's Bites.

When she asked me which city she was in, tears sprang to my eyes. She arrived late at night and was led up the stinking alley, marched through the back door, and chained to the sink pipes. She had enough slack to get around the kitchen and reach the toilet and sink in a tiny room at the back. She slept on a camp bed in the corner and hadn't seen daylight since arriving; the nearest she got to that was when the back door was opened up to take in deliveries. But she was made to hide in the toilet when that happened. After cooking from lunchtime to the early hours, she would clean the kitchen. Once Kaz had bolted the back door, he left by the front of the shop, padlocking the metal shutters behind him. Then he went round to the alley and bolted the back door from the outside, too. Once he was gone, she was able to grab a few hours' sleep before he or his brother returned late morning. Then she would be preparing food—including my curries—until the shop raised its shutters once again at lunchtime.

In one of my first ever replies to her I offered to go straight to the police. But she wouldn't let me. If any officials were involved, she reasoned, deportation would inevitably follow. She needed to remain in Britain, working in a job that paid her cash to send home to her family. All she wanted to do was escape from Kaz's kitchen. She told me that the pipe she was chained to was old and flimsy; she was confident that she could bend or even break it. What she needed me to do was slide the bolts back on the outside of the back door; she would do the same to the ones on the inside of the door, and then she would be free. She didn't want any more help than that.

The situation she was in made me feel sick—and outraged at Kaz. I agreed to help her, and we arranged that the next time Kaz rang, I was to put a note in the tray of breads confirming that tonight was the night. A previous note she sent me had stressed

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the importance of successfully getting her out; she was terrified of what Kaz would do if she tried to escape and failed. I wished she had room on the piece of paper to elaborate, but I reasoned we would soon have plenty of opportunity to talk face to face.

Friday night and I was sitting in the office, fan directed straight at my face, trying to learn the main aspects of insurance law relating to groups travelling abroad (one of the less glamorous modules of my course). At 10:43 the phone's ring put a welcome end to my study.

Pushing the door shut, I picked up the receiver and said, "Mr. Wing's Bakery."

"Rick? It's Kaz here."

By keeping to our established patter, I was able to hide the revulsion in my voice. "Kaz, how's business, mate?"

"Busy, my friend. Very busy. I need six dozen more pitas, two dozen naans, and one dozen peshwari naans."

"No problem. Any extras?"

"Just naans, my friend. All you can get."

"Coming right up. I'll be there in half an hour."

Twenty-six minutes later I pulled up outside Baba's Bites. The place was heaving. A couple were sitting on the pavement outside, he finishing off a burger while she rested her head on her knees and moaned about how pissed she was. In the doorway, four boisterous lads were struggling over a pizza, each one trying to grab the quarter with the most pepperoni on. I rapped on the window and once Kaz caught sight of me, I pointed to the trays of bread balanced on my other arm, then set off round to the back door. As I picked my way between the debris in the alley I saw shadows moving in the glow of light shining from the massage-parlour doorway. Keeping in the shadows, I watched as two men emerged into the alley. Both smiling, they turned round to shake hands with the man who had escorted them to the bottom of the stairs and I realised with a shock that it was Kaz's brother. He patted each man on the shoulder and, as they disappeared round the corner, he headed back up the stairs. So that was the new business interest.

I banged twice on the door and as I leaned down to place the trays on the step, noticed for the first time the bolt drawn back at its base. Looking up, I saw another at the top. They hadn't been there a few weeks ago and, knowing the reason for their sudden appearance, anger surged through me—if a fire broke out at night Meera stood no chance of escape.

In Baba's Bites I stood silently in the far corner and waited for the skinny man sitting on my stool to finish his curry. I knew my presence by his shoulder was unsettling him, but I didn't back off. I even wanted him to say something; a confrontation might dissipate the ugly knot of aggression lodged in my chest. Alternatively, it might aggravate it further: Either way I didn't care. Hurriedly the man wiped up the remains of his curry sauce with a piece of

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naan bread and popped it into his mouth. Glancing at me from the corner of his eye, he left the shop.

I sat down and scowled out the window at the people blundering past, all of their spirits lifted by the arrival of the weekend. I watched and wondered if any had the slightest concern for the army of anonymous workers slaving to keep them served with a plentiful supply of cheap takeaways and taxis. Sitting there, I began to think about other parts of the economy that were kept running by illegal immigrants. The people who deliver our pizzas, clean our offices, pick our fruit and vegetables, iron our shirts, and wash our soiled sheets. No one on the street outside looked as if they could care less. A minute later, Kaz called me over and handed me my curry. Hardly able to meet his eyes, I took it with a brief smile and reclaimed my seat.

Looking at the bright red curry I guessed that I'd put on a good half a stone over the past fortnight. It was as delicious as usual; Meera had explained in one note that it was Kashmiri rogan josh I was eating: She used fennel, cloves, and a pungent resin called asafetida. As I finished it off I saw the tiny scrap of greaseproof paper. Surreptitiously I unfolded it and saw she had just been able to scrawl the words, "Please do not fail me."

Raising my voice unnecessarily, I said goodnight to Kaz, hoping Meera was able to hear me in the back kitchen. The bakery night shift finished just after four A.M. and immediately I drove back to Baba's Bites.

Most of the clubs had shut around an hour before and now just a smattering of mini-cabs roamed the streets searching for their last fare of the night. The shutters at Baba's Bites were drawn down and padlocked, the bin outside overflowing with the remains of that night's sales. Polystyrene trays were thrown into the doorways of the neighbouring shops, chips dotted the pavement like pale fat slugs. I pulled up at the corner and quietly made my way up the alley. The council bin lorry came round every Sunday and Thursday—which meant the refuse had been cleared from the alley only last night. However, Fridays were probably the week's busiest night and already the alleyway was piled with bags of rubbish, boxes, and packaging hurled from the back doors of the shops. At the other end, light shone from the massage parlour's open door. It spilled across the narrow passageway, helping me pick my way forward. Up ahead, an enormous rat heard my approach. We looked at each other for a few seconds, then, to my relief, it casually crept back into the overflow of a nearby drain.

At the back door of Baba's Bites I put my ear up against the cool metal surface and listened. But there was nothing to hear. Tentatively I knocked twice. Instantly a knock was returned. She must have broken free of the pipe and was sitting on the other side of the door listening for my arrival.

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Urgently I whispered, "Meera, is that you?" Instantly I felt stupid: It could hardly have been anyone else.

Her voice was light and sonorous and would have been beautiful to hear if it wasn't packed with so much fear. "Yes, Richard, it's me. I have broken the pipe, the kitchen is flooded."

Looking down, I saw water seeping out from the bottom of the door. Metal began to clunk and rattle as she started undoing the bolts on her side of the door. I stepped back to slide open the ones on my side—and to my dismay saw they were secured with two heavy-duty padlocks. I shut my eyes and silently swore. I didn't think Kaz would bother padlocking a door that was bolted shut from both the inside and out. But now it seemed an obvious precaution, especially considering the prisoner he kept inside. Meera's trembling voice sounded through the thick barrier separating us. "I have done it. Can you open the door?"

"Meera," I whispered. "He's padlocked the bolts. I can't unlock them."

"You must," she cried, now panic-stricken. "I must leave here!"

I needed a hacksaw; and nowhere would be open until morning. By then, our chance would be gone. Even if Kaz turned up late, I couldn't stand there in broad daylight breaking into the back of a shop. "I'm so sorry, Meera, I need a hacksaw. I'll get one later and come back the same time tomorrow."

"No!" she pleaded. "I cannot be here when he comes. He will know what I have done."

I looked at the tamper-proof screws protecting the door hinges: There was no way I could free her. I slapped the palm of my hand against the wall in frustration. "I'm sorry, Meera. I promise to come back."

She began to sob, "He beat me for burning the rice. He said he will send me somewhere far worse than here if I do wrong again. Help me, Richard."

Desperately I whispered back, "I will, tomorrow."

I heard her slump against the door and start to cry. At the other end of the alley male voices were audible coming down the stairs of the massage parlour. Pressing my hands against the door, I could only whisper, "I'll come back tomorrow night," before quickly walking back out onto the street.

As soon as B&Q opened I was searching the place for hacksaws. An elderly assistant saw me scanning the aisles and took me to the correct section. "It's a big padlock. The hasp is about a centimetre thick," I told him.

"Well," he said, rubbing his chin with one hand, "this will get through it in about five minutes."

"Great," I said, taking the saw from his hands and hurrying to the tills.

After that I went to the supermarket and bought a load of food,

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including a pile of fresh fruit and vegetables. I had already decided to insist that Meera stay at my place until she was sorted out with a job. I was confident I could get a place for her in Mr. Wing's bakery, even if it would be for a pittance. Now, given what she had said about Kaz beating her, I wasn't sure what sort of a state she might be in when I finally got that door open. I had formed an image of her face—long dark hair, fragile features, and large brown eyes. Picturing her now covered in bruises, I added bottles of ibuprofen and paracetamol to my trolley.

The rest of the day was spent dozing fitfully on my sofa. I kept waking up, my mind dwelling on what he'd do to her. He wouldn't hurt her too badly, I reasoned. After all, he needed her to cook. But I'd seen the flash of his temper and an uneasy feeling sat heavy in my mind. Flicking the telly on, I caught the lunchtime news. The presenter was describing how a major ring peddling African children into the British sex trade had been broken up by the police. The implications of Kaz's brother's new business interest suddenly hit me like a slap in the face. Kaz himself had said she would end up somewhere far worse if she did anything wrong again. An image of a grimy bed in the Far Eastern Massage Parlour forced its way into my mind. Meera chained to it, a queue of punters at the door, pulses racing at the prospect of a new girl in her teens. I tried to push the thought away.

In Mr. Wing's that night I sat staring at the Chinese calendar on the wall of his office. It was the Year of the Monkey, judging by the number of little primates adorning the pages. The relief I felt when the phone finally rang was instantly diminished when I heard Kaz's voice. Sounding unsettled, he asked for double quantities of just about everything. He hadn't had time to make it to the cash-'n'-carry, he explained. At least I could now make a delivery and then sit at the counter and observe him. Try and gauge by his behaviour just what he might have done to her.

So, after dumping the trays at the back door and kicking it twice, I marched round to the front of the shop. As soon as I stepped inside it was obvious something was wrong. For a start, there was no lump of doner kebab turning on its vertical skewer in the corner. The fridge of canned drinks was almost empty—just cream soda and cans of shandy remained. People were waiting restlessly for their orders while Kaz hurried around behind the counter looking totally stressed out.

"Forget the chicken," said one customer. "I haven't got all night. How much are those things?" He pointed down at the skewers of sheek kebabs lined up under the counter.

"Two-fifty each, including pita bread and salad. How many?" asked Kaz, acknowledging me with a quick wave and passing a portion of lamb rogan josh through the hatch.

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"Two," the young man snapped, rapping a pound coin impatiently against the counter.

I took my corner seat, and after a longer wait than usual, my curry arrived. "You all right?" I asked as Kaz handed it to me over the counter.

"Yeah, staff problems, that's all," he replied distractedly. As I took the polystyrene tray I noticed a long scratch running across the back of his hand. Pretending I hadn't seen it, I took my curry and sat back down. With the first forkful I knew it hadn't been cooked by Meera. The sauce was watery, my extra garnish of coriander was missing, the lamb was burnt, and the rice had been left in the pan until the grains were bloated and soft. As soon as it entered my mouth it turned into something that resembled semolina. I struggled through it, wondering what this meant. Was Meera beaten so badly that she couldn't cook? Or had she already been bundled up the alley and into the massage parlour?

Binning the container, I waited a few moments to try and ask Kaz where his usual cook was, but the shop had grown too busy again. Drunken men milled around at the counter, confused by the lack of doner kebab and settling reluctantly for the poorly prepared alternatives. Not wanting to arouse Kaz's suspicions by lingering for too long, I slipped back out and returned to Mr. Wing's.

As soon as the bakery shut, I said my goodnights and hurried along the street to my car.

Checking that the hacksaw was still safely stashed on the backseat, I set off straight back to Kaz's. In the alleyway I picked my way through the debris, nose wrinkling at the fruity smell being given off by a tray of rotten bananas.

Now, at the door, I knock on it twice and wait for a reply. Nothing. "Meera?" I whisper loudly. "Can you hear me?" On the other side of the door is only silence. Dark thoughts crowd my brain. Have they gagged her? Can she no longer speak because her mouth is so badly swollen? I raise up the hacksaw but, just as I start to saw, I realise that without her to unlock the inner bolts, the door will be impossible to open. Voices at the other end of the alley cause me to crouch behind a pile of bin bags. Four men emerge from the massage parlour. They step out into the alley, laughing and patting one another's backs. One mimes a whipping motion as if he's urging a horse to the finish line and they all roar with laughter again. Holding up hands to slap one another's palms, they head back onto the street and disappear round the corner.

The image of Meera chained to the bed, legs spread, reappears in my mind and I throw the hacksaw angrily down. Looking at the entrance to the massage parlour, I consider barging my way up the stairs and demanding to see her. Two more men appear at the corner and disappear into the open doorway. Angrily I pull out my mobile phone and dial 999. Once connected to the operator I ask

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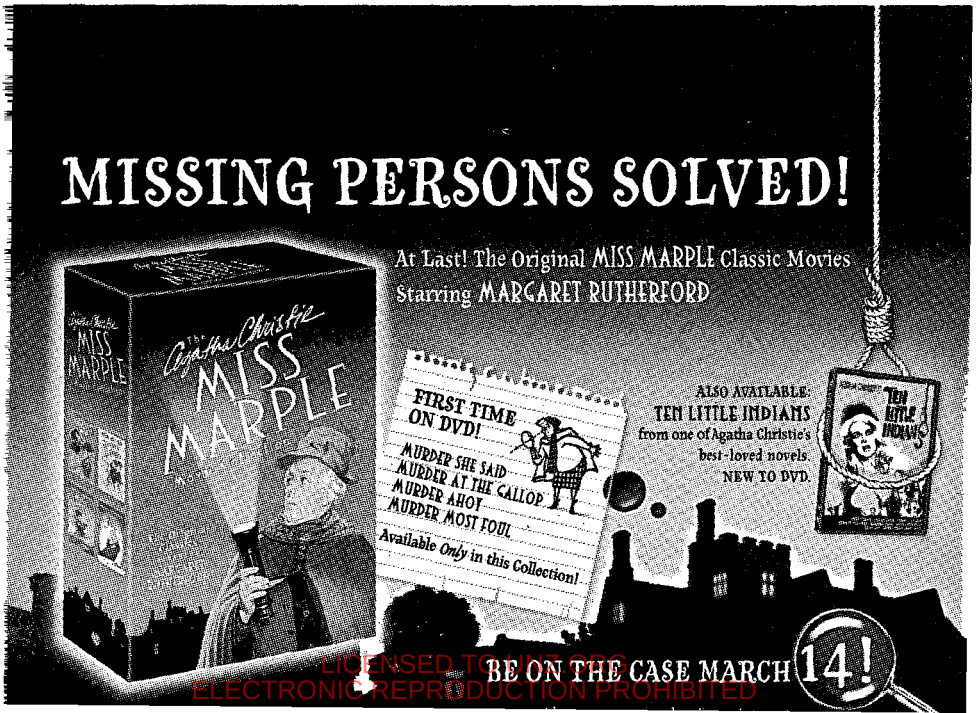
for the police. I'm put through to a tired-sounding man and I explain that I have reason to believe there is an illegal female immigrant being held against her will in the Far Eastern Massage Parlour, just off Cross Street in central Manchester. The person asks how I know this for certain and when I reply that I don't, he says they'll try and arrange for a patrol car to call the next day.

"But you need to send someone now. She's probably up there being raped this very moment," I almost shout.

The person at the other end of the line barely attempts to mask his boredom, assuring me that my report has been logged and will be dealt with at the earliest opportunity. But, he adds, with it being Saturday night, that may well be some time.

Furiously I yell, "Now! You must send someone now!" and kick out at the nearest bin bag. The thin plastic splits, and among the scraps of shredded cabbage, tomato, and cucumber that tumble out is a human hand. Long feminine fingers, bone and gristle visible at the neatly severed wrist. I think of the rows and rows of sheek kebabs Kaz was so eager to sell and the lumps of crudely butchered meat in the curry I'd eaten earlier. As the vomit erupts from my mouth all I can hear is the officer saying, "Sir, are you all right? Can you hear me, sir? Sir?" ●



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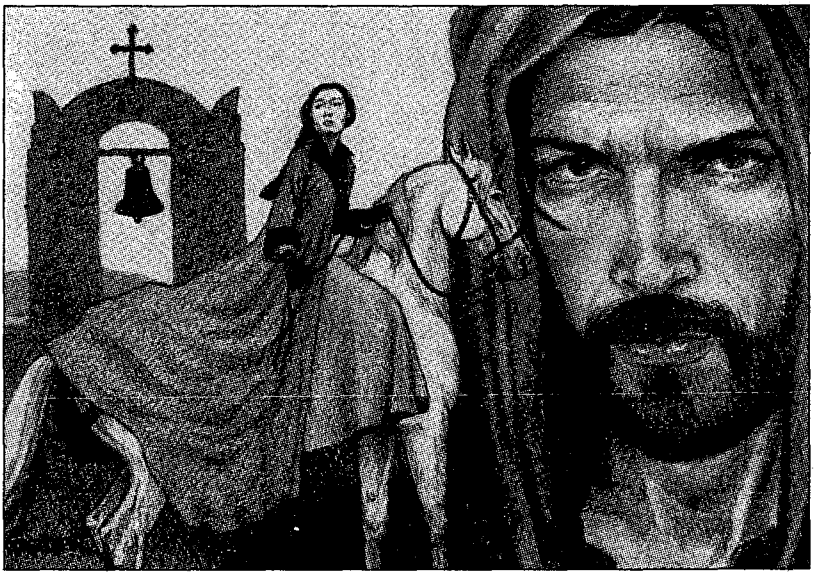

Art by Laurie Harden

SANCTUARY!

by Peter Tremayne

"Fidelma! Do you have a moment?"

Fidelma had been crossing the quadrangle of the law school of the Brehon Morann when she was halted by the voice of the Ard-Ollamh, the chief professor, himself. She turned and smiled nervously as Brehon Morann approached. She had been studying at the famous law school for six years now and had recently passed her examination for the degree of *Clí*, which meant she was now able to practise law in most courts in the land but with limitations as to the cases that she could undertake. However, she was ambitious to become a fully qualified advocate, able to practise defence or prosecution in all fields of the law, and that would mean at least another two years of study.

Even with her present qualifications, she was still in awe of the distinguished figure of the chief professor of the school.

"I understand from the Ollamh Neit that you have recently been studying the laws relating to sanctuary with him?" Brehon Morann said as he halted before her.

"I have," she acknowledged cautiously.

"Excellent. Then you will be interested in accompanying me to my chambers to hear some questions that a visitor has come to put

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to me. It seems he seeks advice on this subject."

"He wishes to consult you on the law of sanctuary?" asked Fidelma, before she realised that her question had already been answered, and Brehon Morann hated repetition. The chief professor did not bother to answer her. Fidelma bowed her head slightly. It was something of an honour to be singled out by the chief professor and given such an invitation.

"I will be most interested," she responded contritely.

Peter Tremayne is a pseudonym of renowned Celtic scholar Peter Berresford Ellis. Mr. Ellis began writing fiction in 1977 and established the Tremayne pseudonym for fantasy novels employing Celtic myths. Today it is associated primarily with the Sister Fidelma series. A new Tremayne story collection is out: *Ensuing Evil and Others: Fourteen Historical Mysteries.*

A man was waiting in Brehon Morann's chambers. A tall, pleasant-looking individual, with sandy-coloured hair, whose clothing and accoutrements pointed to the fact that he was a man of some rank.

"My steward, Adnaí, informs me that you are Faichen Glas, an *aire-deise* of the Uí Echach Cobo," Brehon Morann greeted him.

Fidelma realised from this introduction that Faichen Glas was a noble of some wealth and his people dwelt in the northern kingdom of Ulaidh.

The chief professor then introduced Fidelma and indicated that they should all be seated.

"What is the matter that brings you hither, Faichen Glas?" he prompted.

"I need advice, Brehon Morann. For a week I have been chasing a killer. A man who killed my own cousin. I have sworn an oath to capture him and take him back to my own people for trial. He has eluded me until now. I tracked him to a place not more than a day's ride from here. However, I have found that he has taken refuge in a chapel where the priest in charge claims that he has been granted sanctuary. I have come to ask you, what can I do?"

Brehon Morann sat back with a sigh.

"The Laws of the Fénechus, our own laws, have very strict rules about the concept of refuge, and these predate even those on sanctuary brought in by the New Faith of Christ." He paused. "I think you should tell us your story first and then we will come to the law in a moment. Who exactly is this killer that you seek?"

The noble of the Uí Echach Cobo grimaced.

"He is a man called Ulam Fionn, a drover without fixed land, who has long been suspected of taking cows from the local farmers among my people. He was never caught. It was noticed that he made a good enough profit at markets but nothing could be proved about the provenance of the livestock he sold there. Nine days ago,

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my cousin, Nessán, and his wife were awoken by the lowing of their cattle herd. It was in the morning, about first light. My cousin went out to see what ailed the cattle. The thief was caught in the act but he turned on my cousin and slew him before escaping."

Fidelma coughed nervously.

Brehon Morann glanced at her.

"You have a question?"

"How was this man, Ulam Fionn, identified if your cousin was slain and he escaped?"

"Easy enough to answer," replied Faichen Glas. "My cousin's wife was the witness to the evil deed."

"She was the only witness?"

"Only she, apart from her husband, saw Ulam Fionn."

"Then why was she not attacked?"

Faichen Glas frowned, trying to understand the question.

It was Brehon Morann who explained Fidelma's thinking.

"If she was the only witness to this deed, then this Ulam Fionn might well have contemplated silencing her—the silence of the grave."

"From what she told me, the killer did not see her," the noble replied. "She observed the killing from the window of the farmhouse and was too horrified and fearful to emerge before he left."

"There is no doubt of her identification? She had a clear view of this man, Ulam Fionn?"

"She did. There is no question," Faichen Glas assured her. "And his flight confirms his guilt. I have pursued him for nine days now in order to bring him back to my chief for justice."

Brehon Morann looked thoughtful.

"He has taken refuge in a church here, you say? How did you find him?"

"It was known that he had a cousin named Ulpach who dwelt in this area. I do not know the man, but I was told that they are each as bad as the other, in so far as their morals are concerned. I thought that he might seek refuge with Ulpach but I could not trace either of them. I found a shepherd that had heard a rumour that someone had sought refuge with a religieux in the chapel of St. Benignus . . ."

"That's about half a day's ride from here," mused Brehon Morann. "I do not know the religieux who has charge of it. He is fairly new to the area, by all accounts."

Faichen Glas nodded in agreement.

"I rode there and this man, Brother Mongan was his name, told me that he had given Ulam Fionn sanctuary. I came to you, learned Brehon, to ask whether there is any way that I can take this murderer from the sanctuary and return him to Ulaidh for trial?"

Brehon Morann sat back for a moment and then turned with a smile to Fidelma.

"My young colleague here will tell you of the rights of sanctuary."

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Fidelma coloured, feeling ridiculously proud to be called a colleague of the chief professor. "Well," she began hesitantly, "our laws provide for a place of asylum for those fugitives who seek refuge. And the rules of the New Faith are fairly similar to our concepts. Those of our scholars who have travelled abroad find the same system common in many lands."

Faichen Glas was obviously impatient at the preamble but a frown from Brehon Morann checked him as Fidelma continued.

"In our law we have an area called the *maigen,* a precinct in which a fugitive may claim sanctuary surrounding any chieftain's home. Its extent ranges from that of a minor chieftain, where it is reckoned as the extent of one spear cast from the central house, to that of a chief of the entire clan, where it is reckoned as the extent of sixty-four spear casts from the house. In the *maigen,* a fugitive can claim safety from all who seek to harm him.

"With the coming of the New Faith, the abbeys, churches, and monasteries have assumed the same role as the chieftain's *maigen* in our law. The place of the fugitive is confined to what they call Termonn Land." She glanced at the Brehon Morann. "The word is borrowed from the Latin word *terminus,* the limit or extent of the church lands. In these areas, for a pursuer to kill or injure a fugitive is to commit the crime of *díguin,* the violation of protection. For that there are prescribed punishments. A fugitive cannot be captured or harmed in these areas . . ."

"Unless?" It was Brehon Morann who prompted her when she hesitated.

Fidelma thought for a moment. "There are three conditions that must be met. The owner of the *maigen,* whether secular or ecclesiastic, must have given the fugitive permission, having been given a truthful account by the fugitive of the need for asylum. Thus the owner of the *maigen* becomes legally entitled to act for the fugitive. The next condition is that any pursuer must be clearly informed by the owner that this place is regarded as a sanctuary. The last condition is that while the fugitive remains in the *maigen* he cannot use it to profit from his alleged crimes, going forth from the asylum area and attacking people and then returning to claim asylum."

Brehon Morann nodded approval and turned to Faichen Glas.

"I presume that all three conditions have been fulfilled in the matter we are discussing?"

The northern noble looked troubled. "I know nothing of the law here. It is true that when I approached the church Brother Mongan came forward and forbade me to enter with hospitality, declaring that it was a sanctuary . . . what you said—a *maigen dígona.* That is why I came here to find out what I could do."

Fidelma leaned quickly toward Brehon Morann. "Of course, it is not lawful for even a cleric to give protection to certain classes of fugitive, especially a murderer, indefinitely."

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Brehon Morann grimaced. "My young colleague speaks truly. But the *snádud,* that is, the legal protection, can be extended until guilt or innocence is made certain."

Faichen Glas looked from one to the other with a frown.

"What can I do, then? How can his guilt be proved before he is brought to trial? Ulam Fionn is hiding in this church and I am powerless to bring him to justice. I am minded to go with my men and take the man by force."

"Do that," Fidelma quickly commented, "and it will be you that will stand trial. The fugitive, whatever his alleged crimes, is under protection of the law."

"We must act in accordance with the law, Faichen Glas," added Brehon Morann firmly.

He paused for a moment and then rose with a smile.

"Faichen Glas, you will accept the hospitality of this college—you and your men will stay here while we investigate this matter further." He picked up a handbell from a nearby table and rang it.

Adnaí, the elderly steward of the college, entered almost immediately, as if he had been waiting outside the door for the summons.

Brehon Morann instructed the man to see to the needs of the noble of the Uí Echach Cobo and his men and provide them with food and beds in the college hostel.

When they had gone, Fidelma stood nervously wondering whether she, too, should leave, but Brehon Morann gestured her to be seated again.

"This is a fairly simple case," he began thoughtfully. "Provided the sanctuary has been granted in the legal form, then our friend Faichen Glas will have to return to the land of the Uí Echach Cobo. He must then bring his witness and his own Brehon before the abbot in whose jurisdiction the church of St. Benignus lies. I happen to know Abbot Sionna and he is a fair man. If Faichen Glas can present a just case as to why the sanctuary should be withdrawn, then the abbot can instruct that Ulam Fionn be handed over for trial."

Fidelma waited politely. Her recent class on the law of sanctuary had taught her this much.

"Before I can inform Faichen Glas that this is the course of action he must take, we will have to ensure that the sanctuary has been properly given. I have no reason to suspect otherwise but, Fidelma, in law you can never assume anything. Assumption without verification can lead to great miscarriages of justice."

"I understand," Fidelma replied, not really understanding why he was emphasising what she had already learnt.

"It will be good experience for you to go to this church of St. Benignus and speak with Brother Mongan and ensure that all has been done in legal form," went on Brehon Morann.

"Me?" Fidelma's ejaculation was one of surprise.

"It is only a half-day's ride there and a half-day back again. It

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doubtless means that you will have to stay overnight in a public hostel. There is no one from the college staff who can afford this time. You, on the other hand, are qualified to take this deposition and can be spared from your studies . . . rather this is part of your studies, for this matter of sanctuary may well occur in your future career when you begin to practise law."

"Of course," responded Fidelma nervously and then added weakly, "but I don't know where this church of St. Benignus is."

"I will give you instructions to the abbey of Sionna and he will instruct you further. You may take one of the college horses. Once you have returned, having ensured that all is satisfactory under the law, then we can instruct Faichen Glas on the appropriate action." Brehon Morann glanced through the window at the darkening sky. "It is too late to begin today. You should leave at first light tomorrow." He smiled in gentle rebuke as Fidelma rose slowly and reluctantly. "The practise of law is not all about solving puzzles or clearing up mysteries. Often it is very boring and pedestrian work, checking and rechecking simple facts and making tiring journeys to do so."

Fidelma was contrite again.

"I apologise, Brehon Morann, if I seem to display a lack of enthusiasm for the task. I will, of course, carry it out."

It was noon on the following day when Fidelma found herself sitting before Abbot Sionna. He was a chubby-featured man who was well past his middle years. His silver hair and wide blue eyes gave him an almost cherubic look.

"The chapel of St. Benignus?" he was saying thoughtfully, after she had explained her mission. "It is not far from here and it is only recently that Brother Mongan was sent to administer there. You will find him most helpful. He is a thoughtful man, a good scholar. He entered our abbey as the poor son of a farmer and achieved his scholarship by his own diligence. He worked in our library for a while, where he copied most of the Pauline texts from the scriptures. I was loath to see him go but he wanted experience in administering a small chapel. Don't concern yourself, young lawyer. He will have obeyed all the laws governing the granting of sanctuary."

"But he has not informed you of the matter yet?" Fidelma asked, picking up on the tense used by the abbot.

Abbot Sionna shook his head.

"Brother Mongan would probably have to wait until he could find someone to bring me a message. The chapel is two hours' good riding from here and off the main highway. As he is alone at the chapel, he could not, in law, leave the fugitive there by himself. However, I will leave this matter in your hands. Report back to me as to the situation on your return."

It was midafternoon when Fidelma spotted the oblong shape of

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the chapel of St. Benignus. The five kingdoms of Éirinn were abounding in vast forests, so it was usual for most of the small churches to be built of wood, although in the western parts, such as Fidelma's own homeland of Muman, many abbeys and oratories were constructed of local stone. Here, in Midhe, the middle kingdom, it was unusual to see a limestone church building, strong like a fortress. Such, however, was the chapel of St. Benignus. It was strongly built, six metres wide and twenty-five metres in length. Its roof towered upwards, and the jambs of the main door—the only door so far as she could see—were inclined so that it was wider at the bottom than the top.

The grounds around it were planted with yew and ash. Fidelma knew that this was often called the *fidnemed* or sacred grove covering the area of the *nemed* or *termonn,* the sanctuary's limits.

She approached on horseback, slowly and deliberately, but she was already some way from the gates to the sanctuary area when the door of the chapel swung inward and a thin figure in badly fitting religious robes stepped out.

"Halt, stranger!" the figure called in a harsh voice. "I have to warn you that you are approaching sanctuary land and may not enter if you seek harm to one who has claimed sanctuary here."

Fidelma smiled inwardly. At least the religieux seemed to know the legal requirement of informing everyone approaching the church. She drew rein and sat for a moment regarding the man from her horse.

He seemed young, fair-haired with pale blue eyes. In spite of his slight build, he was pleasant-looking. He came slowly down the short path from the chapel to the gates into the *fidnemed.*

"What do you seek here, daughter?" he asked in a softer tone of voice.

Fidelma tried to control her smile. Daughter! The young religieux was hardly older than she was. But the New Faith was importing a lot of new phrases and concepts to their language. Priests of the New Faith were now being called *Athair* or Father, which was an affectation brought in from the Faith in Rome. A few even preferred the term *Rúinid,* confidant or counsellor.

"Are you Brother Mongan?" she asked.

A frown passed the young man's brow.

"This is my chapel," he acknowledged in reply.

"My name is Fidelma. I am . . ." she hesitated slightly, "I am a lawyer from the college of the Brehon Morann, which lies not far from here."

"I know of it," the young man replied, the frown deepening. "What do you seek here?"

"I would have thought that obvious." Fidelma could not help her automatic retort. "I have been asked to come here to verify that the sanctuary you have given to the fugitive who now resides in

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your chapel has been accorded in strict adherence to the law."

Brother Mongan sniffed slightly. "Had it not been, I would not have given it," he replied with equal curtness.

"It is a legal requirement that this be checked," Fidelma responded, trying not to make her voice sharp, as was her inclination. She did not wish to irritate Brother Mongan, realising that impatience was one of her faults.

"And I confirm it," replied the religieux.

"I am glad to hear it," smiled Fidelma, and swung down from her horse so that she could stand facing him. "However, there are still formalities to be gone through."

Brother Mongan was clearly unhappy.

"Formalities?"

"Of course," she replied, tethering her horse to a nearby bush and glancing around. There were two other horses grazing nearby among the trees. "I suppose one of those belongs to your fugitive?"

Brother Mongan glanced in the direction she was looking and nodded quickly. "But what formalities?" he pressed again.

"Sanctuary has to follow certain legal requirements," she replied. "When the fugitive came here, did he properly identify himself?"

"He said he was Ulam Fionn of the territory of the Uí Echach Cobo. That he sought protection because he was being pursued and sought to escape impending harm."

"That harm coming in what form?"

"He said that his life was in danger. He was falsely accused of murder. He told me that he had caused the death of someone but in self-defence. He said he was attacked by this person and had to defend himself. Those chasing him would not listen to reason and meant him harm."

Fidelma regarded Brother Mongan thoughtfully. It was a different side of the story from that told by Faichen Glas.

"So you offered sanctuary to Ulam Fionn and accepted that you were legally entitled to act for him?"

Brother Mongan nodded but did not speak.

"You are prepared to confirm and guarantee that Ulam Fionn will not take advantage while dwelling in this sanctuary, that he will engage in no unlawful activity? That he will not use this as a base to ride out to bring harm or loss to anyone?"

"Of course."

"And, as in the manner you have already informed me, all who come here are informed that the chapel has become a sanctuary and they must abide by the laws appertaining to that provision?"

"Yes," agreed Brother Mongan impatiently.

So far, Fidelma thought, it seemed straightforward enough.

"Then I simply need to see this Ulam Fionn and speak with him."

Brother Mongan hesitated and seemed about to protest. Then he shrugged.

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"Wait here. He is nervous, so it is best that I speak with him first."

He turned and made his way into the church. Fidelma turned and absently patted her horse's muzzle. With a thoughtful frown she turned to where the other two horses were grazing.

Brother Mongan's voice called from the door of the chapel.

"You may come in, my daughter."

She walked up the path and entered the doorway of the chapel, halting for a few moments to get used to the darkness of the interior. There were a few high windows and the place was lit with candles, but it was still gloomy; shadows danced everywhere in accordance with the dictates of the flickering flames.

"You want to see me?"

Ulam Fionn was a short, thin man with close-set eyes and a beak of a nose. His voice was sharp. Fidelma could not help disliking him and then she felt guilty. She was allowing her personal prejudices to form judgments. Brehon Morann had long taught that those practising law should be free of forming such ridiculous intolerant bias.

"Ulam Fionn, I am sent here to ensure that the proper laws relating to sanctuary have been observed. I understand from Brother Mongan that they have."

The fugitive stood without movement. He did not reply.

Fidelma sighed. She glanced around quickly.

"You have come seeking sanctuary for yourself only?"

"I am alone here."

"So what do you intend to do?"

"Intend to do?" a slight frown crossed the man's face.

"Sanctuary cannot be granted indefinitely. Faichen Glas, who has pursued you here, can now appeal to the abbot in whose authority this chapel comes for permission to plead your case before him and his Brehon. . . . You cannot stay here forever."

"What . . . ?" Ulam Fionn shot a startled look at Brother Mongan. Fidelma saw the religieux was looking bewildered.

"I thought the Faith guaranteed that no person could violate sanctuary," he said stubbornly.

"Faichen Glas has to bring his witnesses and his own Brehon to argue his case in the presence of the abbot. Abbot Sionna," explained Fidelma. "The abbot has to decide, together with Faichen Glas's own judge, whether there is a case to be answered. He can set a time limit to the duration of the sanctuary or hand you over to Faichen Glas for trial immediately."

"Then I am done for," Ulam Fionn said with bitterness. "I have no witness to support me. I will be condemned on the word of the widow of Nessán, whom I killed in self-defence. And it is Nessán's own cousin who pursues me."

"You killed the man in self-defence? Tell me your story," Fidelma said.

"I was taking a shortcut across Nessán's lands, near his farm-

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house, when he suddenly appeared and started to attack me. I sought to defend myself and in doing so Nessán was killed. I heard his wife start screaming 'Murder!' I hid, for I knew Nessán had many friends in the area and I did not. Then word came that Faichen Glas said he would cause me to pay for what I had done. He was a rich and powerful noble. I fled south."

"But why would Nessán attack you?"

Ulam Fionn shrugged indifferently. "Give a dog a bad name. He and his kind have always disliked me. They accuse me of all sorts of things of which I am innocent. The whole world is against me."

Fidelma had a slight feeling of guilt that she could dislike the man simply because of his looks. If she was going to be successful as a *dálaigh,* a pleader before the courts of the Brehons, when she left Brehon Morann's law school, then she would have to curb any emotional prejudice such as judging on people's looks. Looks were no measurement. What was it Brehon Morann often told his students? The tree that has handsome foliage often has a bitter fruit. The reverse was also true.

"The law is not there to take sides but to seek the truth," she placated, feeling sorry for the man. "You should be able to find an experienced lawyer to represent you."

"The nobles of the Uí Echach Cobo are powerful," complained the fugitive. "They will not rest until they have taken vengeance on me."

"The law says that a killing in self-defence is not murder," Fidelma reminded him.

Ulam Fionn laughed sharply. "And I must prove self-defence?"

She shook her head. "Your accusers must prove murder," she pointed out.

"Well, I prefer not to fall into their hands to argue the matter."

Brother Mongan coughed sharply. "That is not the way to look at things, my son," he intoned somewhat piously. "You are safe here for a while but you must heed the counsel of this learned lawyer. When you are in a more reflective mood, you may consider what course you must follow."

Fidelma turned to the religieux. "Thank you, Brother Mongan. I am sure that you will add your voice in advising that the best course is for Ulam Fionn to resort to the law and put his case before Abbot Sionna and his Brehon."

"I will advise him, my daughter," agreed the religieux. "Is there anything else that I can assist you with?"

Fidelma thought for a moment.

She had carried out the legal requirements, but she had a strange feeling of dissatisfaction. She did not really want to leave. She wondered if it was because, should Ulam Fionn be truthful in his claim, and it was certainly a possibility, then she ought to help him resolve the matter. After all, she knew some powerful families could find ways to thwart justice, and if it was a case of self-defence then she

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did not wonder that the man was afraid to seek resolution in the law.

She glanced round the interior of the chapel.

"Are you comfortable here?" she suddenly asked. "It must be cold and draughty living in this old chapel."

"I get by," replied the fugitive, curious at her sudden concern.

"Do not bother yourself on that account, daughter," began Brother Mongan. "There is a small cellar below the altar where there is warmth and comfort. We . . ."

He suddenly cut off and dropped his eyes.

"I am comfortable enough," Ulam Fionn added quickly.

"Then I need hear no more," Fidelma said, as if making up her mind. "Everything seems in order."

Brother Mongan accompanied her to the door of the chapel.

"Is this the first time that you have had to offer sanctuary to a fugitive?" she asked at the door.

"It is," replied the other, seeming relieved by her approval.

"It is difficult to know what to do, to make sure we follow the law," she went on. "I suppose you have read the *Cáin Snádud?*"

Brother Mongan frowned slightly. "The what?"

"The law of legal protection."

He shook his head. "I am no scholar, my daughter. I leave interpretation of the law in the hands of good people like yourself. I am merely concerned with issues of the Faith."

"Of course," Fidelma replied. "But you did seem to know and obey the legal requisites."

"I knew the basic rules, of course," replied the religieux. "What one of us in authority over a chapel or an abbey would not know those?"

"Indeed. And you are fortified by the fact that the Faith also offers such sanctuary so that it does not conflict with the civil law."

"Just so, just so." Brother Mongan smiled.

"What is it that Scripture quotes that gives the foundation for the bestowal of sanctuary? *Nescitis quia templum Dei estis et Spiritus Dei habitat in vobis . . . ?*"

"Just so, just so," agreed Brother Mongan again.

"From Paul's letter to the Hebrews, I think."

"You are very learned, my daughter," Brother Mongan agreed gravely. "I wish you a safe journey back to the school of Brehon Morann."

Fidelma raised a hand in farewell, then mounted her horse and rode away.

Two days later she was seated before the fire in the chamber of the Brehon Morann and sipping a glass of mulled wine, which the chief professor had offered her.

"I congratulate you, Fidelma. But how were you able to resolve this matter?"

Fidelma examined the fire pensively for a moment, as if the

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dancing flames would help her clarify her thoughts.

"It was not hard." She spoke slowly. "Mostly, I suppose, it was merely a guess."

Brehon Morann snorted sceptically.

"A guess? Do you realise what might have happened if your guess had been wrong? There should be no guesswork in law."

"I did not think it was wrong at the time," she said calmly.

"You have a legally trained mind. Take me through the process that produced the result."

"I first went to see Abbot Sionna, as you told me. While speaking to me, he mentioned in passing that Brother Mongan was a scholar. A copyist of the Pauline letters, among other works."

"And so?"

"When I arrived at the chapel, I saw that there were two horses tethered outside. As you know, a religieux does not own or ride a horse unless he's of special rank or privilege. Brother Mongan had no such rank. The abbot told me Brother Mongan was the son of a poor farmer. So I wondered why two horses were there. Ulam Fionn said he was there alone. Then I recalled Faichen Glas saying he suspected Ulam Fionn had fled in this direction to join his cousin, Ulpach. I began to suspect that the other horse was that belonging to Ulpach.

"Having cleared up the matter of the legality of the sanctuary, I thought I would take the matter a step further and ask to see Ulam Fionn, to see if Ulpach was also sheltering in the chapel. He was not. Only Ulam Fionn and Brother Mongan were there. They swore that Ulam Fionn was the only one seeking sanctuary there. But what made me even more suspicious was when I asked about the comfort of residing in the chapel. Brother Mongan was about to talk about the cellar under the chapel and how comfortable it was. He caught himself in time, and Ulam Fionn tried to pass over his mistake quickly enough. I went along with it. My guess was that there was something in the cellar that they did not want me to see."

Brehon Morann looked at her carefully.

"Suspicions only? Guesswork only? You needed more than that to do what you did."

Fidelma smiled softly.

"I needed only the confidence of my interpretation of what my ears heard and my eyes saw. Abbot Sionna said that Brother Mongan was a scholar. When I congratulated him on his knowledge of the law and said he must have read the *Cáin Snádud* he replied that he did not know it and that he was no scholar at all. So I quoted a line that is to be found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians—the line that says "Know you not that you are in the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" I quoted the line in Latin. It is the scripture that is often used to support the concept of sanctuary, for one cannot use violence in the temple of God. But I said it was from the letter to the Hebrews. Brother Mongan congratulated me on my knowledge."

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"Ah, and were he a scholar and copyist of the letters of Paul, he would have known better."

"Exactly so."

"So you rode back to Abbot Sionna?"

"And he sent the abbey's Brehon and half a dozen stout members of the abbey. They went into the chapel, took hold of Ulam Fionn and his companion, and found in the cellar below the trussed-up form of the real Brother Mongan."

"With the fake Brother Mongan turning out to be . . . ?"

"Ulam Fionn's cousin, Ulpach," she ended triumphantly.

"A sad tale. Had Ulam Fionn and Ulpach sought genuine sanctuary, it probably would have been granted and they would have been safe."

"Unfortunately, they trusted no one other than themselves. They were liars and thieves and could not conceive of having confidence in the good intentions of others, let alone depending on them. They did not even bother to ask Brother Mongan to grant them sanctuary."

"I presume that Brother Mongan told Ulpach the rudiments of sanctuary law."

"Ulpach forced Brother Mongan to confirm the basic requirements, but it was obvious to me that Ulpach did not know those things he should have known. He did not know that there is a limitation on sanctuary that applies to those accused of taking a person's life, nor that the abbot has eventually to resolve the granting of sanctuary given by one of his clerics. That surprised the fake Brother Mongan and confirmed to me that it was Ulpach."

Brehon Morann was thoughtful.

"So Faichen Glas will be taking Ulam Fionn and his cousin Ulpach back north to the lands of the Uí Echach Cobo?"

Fidelma grimaced. "There is, of course, the attack and imprisonment of Brother Mongan to be dealt with, and the New Faith will doubtless have something to say on that before they hand the culprits over to Faichen Glas."

Brehon Morann smiled indulgently at his young pupil.

"You have much promise, Fidelma. Indeed, you have promise of becoming a fine lawyer. But you relied on guesswork. Consider this . . . you might have been wrong in your interpretation of these events."

Fidelma shrugged. "Yet as it turned out, I was not. I was confident in my own ability. I have heard it said, 'The confident person may succeed, but the person who hesitates may lose all.'"

Brehon Morann knew that he had often quoted the proverb to his students. He smiled sadly.

"Proverb for proverb, Fidelma. 'The end of the day is always a good prophet.'" ●

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THE NAMELESS POISON

by Edward D. Hoch

It had been some time since Michael Vlado had raced any of the thoroughbred horses he raised on his farm in the mountains of Romania. In his younger days, before he became a Gypsy king, he once took a horse all the way to Moscow to race at the city's famed hippodrome. But these days he was more likely to sell his thoroughbreds in Turkey or Italy or any number of other countries where racing was popular.

Would you believe Ed Hoch has never been to most of the places he writes about? It's true, but the details he provides, whether about the Paris Metro, as in this story, or present-day Cuba, as in a recent Stanton and Ives story, always make us feel we're there. He does it all from his personal library of reference books—with a little help, these days, from the Internet. †

It was his old friend Colonel Segar who told him about the racing in Paris. "Their track for flat racing is the Hippodrome de Longchamp."

Michael nodded. "Racetracks are often called hippodromes in Europe. The chariot races in ancient Greece and Rome were held in hippodromes."

Segar smiled. "You know so much about racing, you should enter your horses more often."

"I would need a professional trainer for that. My own skills are limited."

Colonel Segar was seated in his favorite chair on the porch of Michael's hillside home, indulging in a rare cigar and a glass of red wine provided by Michael's wife Rosanna. "What would you say if I could provide the trainer, and perhaps a jockey as well? All they'd need would be one of your thoroughbreds. The man I have in mind for trainer is also a Gypsy, from Croatia. His name is Antun Bura."

"If you've had contact with him, he's probably a criminal."

"Not really. He's had a few minor infractions such as any Gypsy living in the city might have, but he seems like a good sort. He has a wonderful Russian wolfhound that follows him everywhere."

Perhaps it was mention of the dog that interested Michael most. "Bring him up with you next weekend," he suggested. "I can show him my horses. If I don't want to race them, he might be interested in buying one."

So it was that Antun Bura made the journey with Colonel Segar

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the following Saturday. He was a tall man, much too tall to be a jockey himself, with the weathered, lined face of many Eastern European Roms. He wore a red jacket embroidered with disks and rings, and had a short curved dagger on his belt. His black hair hung in ringlets around his ears, and he spoke with a clear but unfamiliar accent. "The colonel tells me you are Croatian," Michael said in greeting. "What brings you to Romania?"

"The traditional wanderlust," Bura replied with a smile. "We are a nation again now, but for many years we were merely a part of Yugoslavia. I chose the Gypsy way, wandering across Europe making my living by training fine horses to race." He glanced out at the fields. "And I see you have some fine ones here. Do you race them?"

"Not for many years. I raise them for sale now. The colonel says you have a Russian wolfhound."

He smiled. "Yes, Rasputin. He's a fine dog. My jockey is looking after him back in Bucharest." He watched the horses for a time and then said, "The colonel may have told you I am seeking a good horse to race in Paris. Would you wish to join me in this?"

"I don't know," Michael admitted. "Paris is far away."

"Surely not for a Rom! Segar tells me you have even been to England."

"But not with a horse. Why Paris? Is there no racing in Croatia?"

"There is little of anything there, at least for me. Some villages have no electricity or running water. The only way to survive is to settle in one place and become integrated into the economy of that region. It is a life that is not for me. Horse racing is in my blood. I have worked at some of the best tracks in Europe. But Paris is a new challenge. I have visited the track but never raced there. Also, my jockey Chris has ridden there and knows the track."

Michael showed off Renegade, a favorite horse of his but one past his prime, with occasional stiffness in his leg joints. "I've never been able to sell him," he told the Croatian, "and now he's six years old, a bit stiff in the joints at times."

"Not too old. With proper training he could win a few races."

"You say you have a jockey?"

Antun Bura nodded. "Chris Daum. Been racing for five years at most of the major tracks in Europe. We could hire a jockey at the track, but it's better to have someone we know and trust."

Michael had one of the smaller Gypsy youths saddle up Renegade and ride him around the improvised track. "Impressive," Bura decided, checking the time with his stopwatch. "Will you take him to Paris? I have my horse trailer and jockey waiting in Bucharest."

"He would need a medical checkup and registration to race there. I doubt if he could even cross the borders without papers."

Colonel Segar spoke up then. "I could handle any formalities regarding transit papers for the horse. He could be registered and examined when you arrive in Paris."

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Michael was strongly tempted. He left them and went inside to speak with Rosanna about it.

"How long would you be away?" she asked.

"A few weeks. Certainly less than a month."

She could see that he wanted to go, and she was not one to stop him. "Go, race your horse and bring back the winnings. We will slaughter a lamb and feast when you return."

Antun Bura arrived at Michael's farm two days later with a pickup truck hauling a small horse trailer. Seated in the cab with him was his short jockey and a large dog. It wasn't until they both got out that he realized Chris Daum was a young woman.

"Is this—?" he started to ask.

She gave him a tired smile, as if she'd been through this all before, and reached out a hand to greet him. "Yes, I'm the jockey. Christine Daum. Antun should have told you I'm a woman." She was slim, probably weighing little more than a hundred pounds, but with a firm handshake that seemed to assure him she'd keep a tight grip on the reins.

Michael was speechless only for a moment. He'd known plenty of Gypsy women who were skilled riders, and his only hesitation was her light complexion. "Are you a Rom?" he asked.

"No, and I'm not Antun's girlfriend, either, if you were wondering. This is strictly business. I need a job and he needs a horse. I've raced at the Paris track before."

The dog that had followed her out of the truck must have weighed almost as much as she did. He was a fine specimen of Russian wolfhound whom she quickly introduced. "This is Rasputin, a full-blooded borzoi. He's become a great friend."

Michael had always gotten on well with dogs, though not often ones this large. Rasputin stood over two feet tall, and had long silky hair. He patted him and spoke soft words of greeting. Then he led Chris over to the paddock, with Bura and the dog following. "This is Renegade. Do you think you can ride him?"

"Right now?"

"I'm not going to travel twelve hundred miles across Europe just to discover in Paris that you can't ride my horse."

"All right," she agreed. "Let's put a saddle on him."

Renegade was not an easy horse for a stranger to ride, but she mastered him quickly, taking him around the paddock a few times and then trying him out on the track. "She did as well as your Gypsy lad," Bura said, stopwatch in hand. "And it was only her first time."

Rosanna watched it all from the sidelines and agreed with Michael that the young woman was a born jockey. "Go with her. She might win."

"We'll have to register the horse, have him examined. That will all take time."

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They loaded Renegade into the horse van and were on the road that afternoon. By midnight they had crossed the border into Hungary. The shortest, most direct route to Paris took them on through Austria and southern Germany into France. They could make no great speed pulling the horse trailer, and Michael estimated the journey might take four days.

Since it was his truck, Bura did most of the driving. At night they slept along the road, pulling off into a field while they ate and tended to Renegade. Chris seemed to have taken charge of the dog, and she walked him every night before they turned in. On the third night, with the Croatian already snoring in his sleeping bag, Michael asked her, "How did you two happen to hook up?"

"He saw me race in Prague last month and asked if I wanted to join him as a partner. I was a bit suspicious because he had no horse, only promises. But he seemed a good sort at the time."

"You learned differently when he wanted to sleep with you?"

She glanced over at the sleeping man before responding. "No, that problem came and went quickly. He suggested it and I said no. He hasn't asked since. But I wonder about him. I wonder if he really is what he seems."

"How do you mean?" Michael asked.

"Well, that dagger, for one thing."

"It's not unusual for a Rom to wear a dagger. Our women often do, too."

"There are other things," Chris said, hedging a bit.

She would say no more that night, and in the morning they were on the road again with Renegade and Rasputin, only another day's drive from Paris. The Hippodrome de Longchamp was just west of the city along the winding Seine River. They had no trouble finding the huge track, so large that the backstretch was hidden by trees and could only be seen from the stands on video screens. The day's racing was over, but they found the office of the race secretary, who seemed willing to register Michael's horse. His name was Pierre Plante, a dark-haired man with a little moustache and glasses. He spoke French without inquiring whether they knew it or not. The first thing he asked was to see the horse, so Michael unloaded him from the trailer.

"Are you Gypsies?" he asked, eyeing Bura's colorful jacket and dagger.

"I am Romanian," Michael answered, avoiding a direct answer. "Renegade is my horse. This is Antun Bura, my trainer, and Christine Daum, my jockey."

The track steward inspected Renegade's teeth. "How old is he?"

"Six years. Do you have races for that age group?"

"We have a race for four-year-olds and up. He should do well there. Has he raced professionally?"

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"Only at local fairs, never at a track. Our jockey has raced here, though."

Plante turned to regard Chris Daum. "Are you registered with the jockey club?"

She nodded and showed him her card. "I've raced here four times. Had a second-place finish last season."

He studied the card and passed it back to her. "German nationality?"

"Yes."

That seemed to satisfy him. He assigned Renegade a stable number and had only a word of caution for them. "That big dog cannot be around the horses. Keep him away."

"He's very friendly," Bura said.

"But some horses are not. Keep the dog away. And you can't wear that dagger around here." As he walked away he muttered something about Gypsies.

Michael and Chris bathed Renegade after the long drive, while Bura went out to check on rooms for them. There were dormitories in the backstretch for grooms, exercise riders, and others—mainly immigrants—who worked for meager wages. But Bura came back an hour later to say he'd found a place nearby that rented rooms by the week. He and Michael could share one while Chris took the other. "Better than staying a week in sleeping bags," he told them.

In the morning there were exercise riders to take the horses around the track, but Chris insisted on exercising Renegade herself, at least for the first day. Michael watched from the sidelines with Bura. "The horses run clockwise here," the trainer said. "And there is no tote board showing the odds. You must find a TV monitor for that. An infield pixel board shows the finishing positions of the top seven horses but gives no odds. The crowd here is encouraged to dress up, with suits and ties for the men and fashionable hats for the ladies. When I was here a few years back they had a special promotion with free admission to women wearing hats."

"Do you know any of these people?"

"I ran into an English jockey named Tommy Harris who's got some mounts here this week. I've seen him around at various tracks. A good man, but the pressures of racing every day are wearing him down. He has ulcers now."

"You told me back in Romania that it was better to have a jockey we knew and trusted. Are some races fixed?"

"No more so here than anywhere. There will always be jockeys who hold back their mounts, or who speed them up with a shock from a tiny battery. The racing stewards know all the tricks, though, and very little gets by them."

Michael had been watching Renegade through binoculars as the horse rounded the first turn in front of a large windmill, but finally put them down when horse and rider disappeared from view in the

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backstretch. "Anything could happen back there," he said.

"The cameras cover it all."

"I suppose so." Chris Daum was suddenly visible again, holding her horse to a canter as they came around into the home stretch. He went out on the track to meet her. "Nice job."

"I love him," she said, patting Renegade's withers. "He takes to this track like he's been racing all his life. Could I try opening him up?"

"Not today," Bura decided. "Maybe in a day or two."

She dismounted without argument. One of the other trainers, a Spaniard named José Contraer, had been watching with interest. "That's a fine-looking mount. Is he new to Longchamp?"

"This is his first look at the track," Michael replied. "We've come from Romania and hope to race him next week."

"How old is he?"

"Six years."

He smiled. "My horse Matador is four years old. They may be up against each other. I am both owner and trainer."

"Do you race here often?"

Contraer nodded. "Several times a year. It is a good track, with purses large enough to attract fine horses."

"Do you have your own jockey?" Antun Bura asked.

"When I'm here at Longchamp, Tommy Harris usually rides for me."

That perked Bura's interest. "I know Tommy. I saw him race in Spain. I was talking to him yesterday after we arrived."

"Tommy is a good jockey. Already he has three wins for me here this season."

They walked around after breakfast, exploring the track's backyard with its grassy fields and shade trees for picnicking. There were the usual stands for souvenirs, food, and beverages. Here and there were statues of some of the great horses of the past. One was of Suave Dancer, winner of the track's major event, the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, referred to familiarly as the Arc.

Pierre Plante, the track secretary, held a meeting that morning for newcomers to the Longchamp Hippodrome. He explained the intricacies of wagering: In races of seven horses or less there was only win-and-place betting. He talked about the length of the races, which varied up to a maximum of 2,400 meters—about a mile and a half—for the Arc and other major events. All races were on turf, and the firmness of the turf was indicated by a number announced between races. The number 1 meant a hard turf, while numbers 5 or higher indicated a heavy turf. A firmness of 3 was considered ideal.

There were about a dozen newcomers in the meeting and Plante soon shifted to what was obviously his prime topic. "If this is your first time at Longchamp, I must warn you that any use of drugs or stimulation on a horse is absolutely forbidden. The stewards keep a watchful eye on every mount, every jockey. If you are discovered dop-

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ing a horse or fixing a race in any manner you will be barred from this track for life and may be subject to criminal charges as well."

There was more of that, delivered in perfect French that some in the audience couldn't fully comprehend. But the message was clear enough for Chris. Once outside she let Antun Bura get ahead of them and then paused to speak with Michael. "I hinted before that there were things about Bura that bothered me. I know the Rom lifestyle is worlds away from my own German upbringing, but he—" She paused. "I'd better start at the beginning. After we met, there was a great deal of conversation about horses. He mentioned once that he knew some tricks to help them win. He travels with a small toilet kit and one night I needed an aspirin. I knew he had some so I went in his bag in search of it. He had something else in there, an unlabeled bottle of yellow liquid with a hypodermic needle. Could it be something he's injecting into the horses?"

"Possibly, although he might be an addict himself."

"I asked him what it was and he said he had to give shots to Rasputin sometimes. I don't believe that. The dog seems perfectly healthy to me."

"I'll try to get a look at it," Michael said. "Thanks for telling me."

"After the secretary's warning today I don't want to be involved in anything shady. I've only been racing for a couple of years and I can't afford to have a blemished record."

The exercise rider took Renegade out each morning, and Chris rode him, too, getting the feel of the horse before their first race. The medical report had been good, with Renegade's first race scheduled for the following week in the four-year-olds-and-up category. Each day Michael mixed with the crowd in the grandstand, watching their betting habits and the change in odds on the television monitors. It was a well-dressed crowd, as Bura had said, and once Bura remarked, "This is a long way from the country fairs, isn't it?"

"It is," Michael agreed. It brought back memories of the time he'd raced a horse in Moscow, when the Communists were still in power there.

On Tuesday, the day before their first race, the track was dark and Chris drove them into the city in a little car she'd rented, showing them some of the sights of Paris. Michael arranged to return early to their rented rooms and sought out the toilet kit Chris had mentioned. Rasputin ran over to him, wanting affection, and Michael played with the borzoi for a few minutes. He found the small bottle of yellow liquid and the hypodermic needle, just as Chris had said. Unscrewing the top of the bottle, he inhaled but could detect no odor. He placed a tiny drop on his finger and transferred it to his tongue. The taste was slightly sweet and not very strong, but almost at once he felt a slight tingling sensation on his tongue. He quickly rinsed out his mouth with water and wiped his tongue with a cloth, returning the bottle to Bura's kit. Whatever it was, he didn't like it.

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Later, at the track, Michael noticed that Tommy Harris, the English jockey who rode for Jose Contraer, had returned from his day off in a highly agitated state. Toward evening Michael asked Chris what his problem was. She shook her head. "I don't know exactly. He lost something on the Paris Metro and apparently it was very important. I told him the city has a massive lost-and-found warehouse where they collect all objects found around the city. He's going there after his race tomorrow."

Chris had her own troubles. There was another woman jockey at the track, a nineteen-year-old girl from Lyon named China Tapson. She seemed to think that Chris was invading her territory, attracting owners who might want to try a woman jockey. Even after Chris explained she would only be riding Renegade there was friction between them. That evening, at a canteen behind the grandstand where the track personnel often went for a light meal, China made some remark while Chris was passing her table. Chris turned and grabbed her shirt and the next thing Michael knew they were tussling on the floor. He dashed over to separate them, but not before Chris landed a stinging slap across the younger woman's face.

"What was that all about?" Michael asked, leading her away.

"Nothing."

"Chris—"

"She called me a Gypsy lover, in so many words."

"Then she deserved the slap."

He glanced across the canteen to where the Spaniard and his English rider were sharing a beer and crêpes at one table and Pierre Plante was carrying a tray of food past them. Most of the diners hadn't even noticed the scrap between Chris and China. Chris and Michael were just settling down again when someone yelled from across the canteen and Michael turned to see a man on the floor. He hurried over to find Tommy Harris writhing in agony. "This man needs a doctor!" he yelled.

Harris died at the hospital within an hour while doctors stood by helplessly. "He was almost certainly poisoned," the attending physician told Michael, who had ridden along in the ambulance. "But without knowing the type of poison there was no time to save his life."

Michael returned to the track and reported to Pierre Plante. "They'll have to do an autopsy. Apparently he was poisoned."

The track secretary paled at the word. "What was he eating at the time?"

"Some sort of crêpe, I think. And he and José Contraer were sharing a bottle of beer."

"The police should have been called," Plante said.

Michael shook his head. "No one thought about poisoning until he died. We all just wanted to get him to the hospital. I under-

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stand that the police have now come and inspected the canteen, but everything had been cleaned up before they arrived."

"At least no one else was sickened," Plante said.

"No," Michael agreed, "apparently just Harris."

The following morning Longchamp's backyard was abuzz with talk of the English jockey's death. The police had returned, questioning anyone who had sat near the dead man. Contraer was busy trying to find a replacement jockey for his four-year-old, and he even came to Michael to see if he could hire Chris Daum for that day's race.

"Sorry," Michael reminded him, "but she's riding Renegade in the same race."

"Of course. I'll find someone else."

As he turned away, Michael thought of something. "José, your jockey seemed upset yesterday because he'd lost something of value on the Paris subway. Do you know what that was about?"

"No. He said nothing to me."

"You were eating together when he was stricken."

The Spaniard nodded. "We each got a crêpe and I took a bottle of beer. I drank as much as I wanted and then gave the rest to Tommy."

"Did he have a glass?"

"No, we both drank from the bottle. So the poison couldn't have been in there."

"Did anyone approach your table while the two of you were eating?"

He shook his head. "Your trainer Bura said hello but only stopped for a moment."

Their race was the second that afternoon, and Michael felt the old thrill he remembered from years ago when the horses were brought outside to be saddled and paraded around the ring once by the grooms. Then Chris climbed aboard and the horses were walked around one more time before heading out to the track. The jockeys took over, heading the horses at a brisk trot toward the starting gate. Michael was surprised to see that the Spaniard had recruited China Tapson to fill in for Harris.

Being new to the track, Renegade was a long shot at thirty-to-one. The bell rang as the gate opened and the horses broke. None of the ten horses, all four years and older, was out to set any track records, and at the first turn eight of them were still bunched together. Michael and Antun watched through binoculars, but once the horses went into the backstretch they were hidden by the trees.

"They're still bunched," Michael said, glancing at the TV monitors. After a moment they came into view again, with four horses pulling away from the rest. One of them was Renegade.

"He's doing it!" Bura shouted. "Chris knows how to handle him."

"That's Contraer's horse trying to pass her. That Tapson woman would love to beat Chris if she could."

They made the far turn on the track, which was wide and

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sweeping, then came thundering down the home stretch. Chris and China Tapson were battling every inch of the way, but one of the other horses pulled ahead of them both. Chris managed a final burst of speed from Renegade, enough to beat Contraer's Matador to the finish line by a head and capture second place.

Michael let out his breath. "Not bad for a first try," he said, hurrying out to meet his horse and jockey.

China Tapson slid down from her saddle and glared at Chris. "Next time will be different," she promised.

Michael decided not to let that pass. He hurried after her and grabbed the young girl's arm. "What's the matter with you? Are you looking for trouble?"

She glared at him. "We don't want Gypsies here," she told him, her face only inches from his. "And I don't want to be poisoned like Tommy Harris."

"We had nothing to do with that."

"No? Everyone knows Gypsies are experts at poisoning their enemies. You assumed it would be Tommy riding Matador and that he'd beat you easily, so you got rid of him!"

"Don't make accusations that you can't prove," he said, releasing her arm. Crazy as it was, he had a sinking feeling. He was remembering that bottle of yellow liquid among Bura's possessions.

Later, while Chris and Bura were celebrating her second-place finish, Michael returned to the apartment and checked the bottle in Bura's case while Rasputin sniffed at his feet. It was no longer full. The level of the yellow liquid was down an inch or more.

Michael knew he had to confront the Croatian about it. If a crime had been committed and Bura was involved, he had to know what was going on.

When they returned from their celebration, he called the trainer aside and showed him the bottle of yellow liquid. "What is it, Antun?" he asked. "Is it poison?"

"It's nothing. Medicine for Rasputin. I give him a shot sometimes."

"Let's see you give him one now."

"I—He doesn't need it now."

"Antun, did you poison Tommy Harris?"

"I swear I didn't! I barely knew him. Why should I kill him?"

"Then tell me what's in this bottle."

"It's nothing. An elixir for the dog."

"If you won't give it to him, drink some yourself."

"Michael, be reasonable. I had nothing to do with Harris's death."

"It's poison, isn't it? That girl China was right when she said Gypsies know about poisons. I didn't learn much myself, up in the hills, but with all your travels you probably picked up a few things."

The trainer's expression was bleak. "I can explain it if you'll only give me a chance. Wait a day or so, that's all I ask."

"All right," Michael finally agreed. That night in bed he reflected

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on how little he knew about this man Colonel Segar had recommended, this man who might be carrying a nameless poison in his bag.

At breakfast Chris Daum came to him with some information. "When Harris came back the other evening, upset because he'd lost something on the subway, he told one of the other jockeys it was a little leather-bound diary he kept of all his races. He was really frantic to get it back."

"Maybe he was going to write a book," Michael speculated. "Wasn't there a British jockey who wrote about his racing career?"

"There've been several. One of them, Dick Francis, became a famous mystery writer." She thought about it for a moment. "I wonder if the loss of that diary might be connected to his death."

"Didn't you say that Paris maintains a warehouse for items lost around the city?"

Chris nodded. "I told Tommy about it, but he was dead before he could go looking for it."

"Suppose we went there. Do you know where it is?"

"I was there once. It's a huge place in the southern Fifteenth Arrondissement. They claim a truckload of objects arrives daily just from the metro."

"Let's go take a look," he suggested. "We're not racing today."

They drove into Paris in Chris's car, negotiating the curving roads of the Bois de Boulogne until they reached the Avenue Victor Hugo. Then, after numerous turns too complicated for Michael to follow, Chris pulled into the parking lot of an immense, nondescript warehouse in an industrial part of the city. The reception room, up a short flight of stairs, was a large space hung with photos illustrating the office's history.

"Quite a place, isn't it?" the clerk behind the desk said as they looked over the historic documents. "It was established two hundred years ago by Napoleon the Third to collect all objects found in the streets of Paris. We have hundreds of visitors a day, searching for lost treasures, or at least a misplaced cell phone."

"We're looking for a small leather-bound diary," Michael told him. "It was left on the metro day before yesterday." He guessed at the rest of the description. "It's written in English, and the owner's name in the front is Tommy Harris."

The clerk nodded. "I believe we had a call about that Tuesday evening, just before we closed. Someone from the Longchamp racetrack, a trainer named José something."

"José Contraer?" Chris asked.

"I believe that was the name. He said his jockey had lost a diary in the metro, but I told him the items collected that day wouldn't arrive here until yesterday."

"Did he come for it?"

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"Not while I was on duty."

"How are things arranged, by date or by type of item?" Michael wondered.

"By item. We have about thirty-five hundred cell phones down there at the moment," he answered, gesturing toward the floor.

"Could we go down and take a look?"

"I'm afraid the public's not allowed into the warehouse. Some of the items there are quite valuable. We once found a pouch of diamonds, lost by a woman from New York. We have human skulls, perhaps left by medical students, some pistols, a wooden leg, almost anything you could imagine. But if you will write out your description of the item I will see if I can locate it."

He took the description and disappeared into the back room. Another clerk came out to tend to some new arrivals. One was a girl who had lost her motorcycle helmet at an outdoor café on the Left Bank. "This is quite a place," Michael marveled. "Every city should have one."

Presently their clerk returned, carrying a small leather-bound volume wrapped in a sheet of paper and a rubber band. "This might be what you're looking for," he told them. "I'll need to see some identification before I can release it."

"I'm not Tommy Harris," Michael admitted. "He was killed at the track Tuesday night. But he desperately wanted to recover this diary of his racing career. We want to give it to his family."

"Well," the clerk said a bit uncertainly, "I don't know."

"I was a fellow jockey of his at Longchamp," Chris said, showing her identification card. "And this man is a horse owner."

He studied their cards and wrote down their names. "All right," he said finally, sliding the diary across the counter to Michael, who quickly opened it and saw Tommy Harris's name on page one.

"Let's go look at this in the car," he told Chris.

The diary went back only three years, and started when Harris was still racing in England. The name and age of the horse, trainer, and owner were given, along with the date and place of the race, the time, and the finishing position. The first several entries were out of the money, but gradually there were second- and third-place winners, along with an occasional first. In the margin after some races, three-letter abbreviations began to appear. EPO was one of them.

Chris pointed to it. "That could refer to the hormone EPO, administered to increase red blood cells. It's called blood doping and is illegal at most tracks."

"Perhaps that's why he left England," Michael said, pointing out that after a gap of a few months Tommy Harris was racing in Spain and France. "Antun said he saw him race in Spain."

Chris turned a page of the diary. "Here's the first listing of José Contraer's name as owner and trainer. Here's another EPO, and a new set of initials—COB. What could that mean?"

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"It seems to appear mostly with older horses." He flipped to the last page but there was no entry for the previous day's race. Tommy Harris hadn't lived to ride Matador at Longchamp that day.

"We'd better get back and show these entries to Antun," she said. "He might know what COB stands for."

"I'm afraid he might," Michael said. "Remember that bottle of yellow liquid."

Antun was not at the track and when they checked their rooms neither he nor his borzoi was anywhere in sight. "He must be walking the dog," Chris said. "I'm going to the Spaniard's place to ask him about this diary. He might be familiar with some of those abbreviations."

Michael went over to the canteen, thinking he might find some jockeys relaxing after the day's races. Instead he ran into Pierre Plante. The secretary was clearly agitated. "The detectives were here a short time ago. They have a preliminary autopsy report on Harris."

"Was it poison?"

He nodded. "But not what anyone expected. They wanted to know if we'd seen any snakes around the track."

"Snakes?"

"Apparently he was killed by a poisonous snake, though they can't find any puncture wounds on the body."

"What kind of snake?" Michael asked, though even as he asked the question he already knew what the answer would be.

"That's the really odd part. They need more tests to be certain, but they think it was a cobra."

Michael remembered the abbreviation COB in the diary and something else clicked in his memory. He stopped a startled China Tapson as she was leaving the canteen and blurted, "When did José hire you? Yesterday you said we assumed it would be Tommy riding Matador. But you knew he wouldn't be even before he died, didn't you?"

"José hired me Tuesday night, before dinner. He paid me well, too," the girl admitted.

Michael was running now, headed for José Contraer's apartment. He was halfway across the stable area when he realized he wasn't alone. Rasputin had appeared from somewhere to join him, unmindful of someone's shout to "Get that dog out of here."

Then he saw Contraer, wrestling the diary from Chris's hand as he shoved her aside. "Let her go, José," he called out.

"This is none of your affair," the Spaniard replied. "The diary belonged to my jockey."

"And when he lost it you killed him," Michael said. "He'd used abbreviations to record any time drugs were used on the horses he rode."

Chris had moved away from him and Michael realized that Antun

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had come running up after his borzoi. "What's going on?" he asked.

Contraer's hand came out of his belt holding a knife. He swung it at Michael, but Antun jumped between them, holding the blade he wasn't supposed to carry. "Do you want a knife fight with a Rom, scum?"

The Spaniard thought better of it and lowered his weapon. "I had nothing to do with his death."

But Michael knew differently. "The autopsy shows he died of snake poison, most likely cobra venom. When I heard that, I remembered something I'd been told a long time ago, that horses with pain and stiffness in their joints can be helped by a numbing injection of cobra venom. Of course it's illegal at most tracks, just as EPO and electric shock devices are illegal. It's not the sort of thing a jockey would carry with him, but an unscrupulous trainer might." He avoided glancing in Bura's direction as he said those words. "Snake venom is usually yellow in color. It could be mixed with beer without being noticed."

José Contraer smiled. "Then you must know that snake venom is usually harmless when swallowed. People often suck it out of snakebites to save someone's life."

"Cobra venom may be injurious if swallowed. You were safe enough drinking only a little from that beer bottle, but you must have known your jockey Harris suffered from ulcers. When that venom hit the open sores in his stomach, death was a certainty."

"Maybe someone else poisoned him that way, but not me."

"No? You said you knew nothing about Harris losing his diary on the metro, but you phoned the Paris lost-and-found department on Tuesday looking for it. You couldn't get there to claim it yesterday because you were needed at the track, and we must have beaten you to it this morning. You also pretended to search for a replacement jockey, but you'd already asked China Tapson about riding Matador before Harris was poisoned. When Harris told you he'd lost that diary listing the drugged horses he'd ridden, you decided you had to kill him before he told anyone else about it."

The fight had gone out of Contraer. He stared at their three faces and knew it was over. "Harris was afraid that diary would fall into the track secretary's hands and he'd be barred from racing. He was going to confess everything to save himself. Blame everything on me."

Michael summoned Pierre Plante, who listened to their story and promptly phoned the police. Later in their apartment Michael played with Rasputin while Chris prepared some food. "Get rid of the rest of your cobra venom," he told Bura. "I don't want that or anything else injected into Renegade. He's going to win or lose on his own."

The trainer nodded reluctantly. "Will you be going back home now?"

"Not until we have another try at winning at Longchamp." ●

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The Plea Bargain

by Peter Turnbull

York, England, might seem an unlikely setting for stories of organized crime and professional hit men, but Peter Turnbull makes it all seem real, not only in this new story in the series starring DCI Hennessey and Sergeant Yellich, but also in his August '05 novel in the series entitled *Chill Factor*. Other new Turnbull books are *Sweet Humphrey* (Severn House) and *Trophy Wife* (Allison & Busby).

The man walked his dog, as he had always walked his dog, every day at seven A.M., in the park—each day, every day, because, he would explain, dogs don't know when it's Sunday or Christmas Day. And so at seven A.M. each day there he was with Basil in the park. Man and friend going for a walk together. "The park" was so called because it was cultivated and had benches and statues and concrete pathways, but also had no boundary, no gates that were locked at sunset each day, as all other parks in the city of York do. And as such, the park, the real name of which was Millington Stray, a "stray" in Yorkshire meaning an open area of land, often attracted the "less savoury" people of York, as the man was wont to call them. The people of the night who sit up in the park in the hours of darkness, often even up in the branches of the trees, finding solace and company in the darkness, and who melt away with the dawn to sleep the day away in damp, miserable bedsits. Many such are mentally ill, a few merely eccentric, a few dangerous, but mostly such people, in the man's experience, are placid and harmless, and really quite fearful of life. By seven A.M., especially during the summer months, most of the night people had vanished from the park, just a few stragglers might remain, a few content to sit under the trees until they felt forced out by the "normal" people, who eyed them with hostility and suspicion. Some of the night people the man had gotten to know by sight. On that morning in mid July, the man saw a man he had not seen before, not a night person, his dress was that of a man with self-respect, his shoes were polished, his blue jacket seemed to gleam in the low morning sun and contrast jarringly with the greenery. The man in the blue jacket smiled at the dog

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walker as they neared each other.

"Don't go down there." The man with the blue jacket jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the direction from which he had come, and the direction the dog walker was going towards. "Not unless you have a strong stomach. Wondered why there were no 'nighties' about; now I know. They've all been scared off." And he walked on without stopping.

The dog walker walked on, concerned, curious, alert, and he also sensed a change in his dog's attitude; there was a certain reluctance in his small black collie crossbreed, but nothing he could see seemed to be out of place. He glanced across the park, left and right of the path . . . no movement, just a girl with yellow hair in a red tracksuit a few hundred yards away jogging down another path. He had seen her before, many times, and if they both kept to their usual routes they would meet and pass each other, with a nod and a smile and a merry "Good morning."

But nothing, nothing out of the ordinary.

Then he saw it.

Two men. Well dressed. No "nighties" there.

Dead.

Laid out side by side on the grass at the side of the path.

Their heads inclining away from each other.

But very, very dead.

George Hennessey parked his car behind the line of police vehicles, and the mortuary van, and a distinctive red-and-white Riley at the entrance to the park. He left his vehicle and nodded in response to the constable's salute as he passed and followed the concrete path into the park until he saw the police activity: the white-shirted constables, the tall form of Detective Sergeant Yellich, and the slender form of Dr. D'Acre. He approached Yellich and saw that in front of Yellich were two long mounds, covered in plastic sheeting. A blue-and-white police tape tied to trees and shrubs, at waist height, formed a cordon round the two mounds.

"Three-nine call just after seven this morning, sir," Yellich said. "Member of the public found them . . . they are two men, lifeless when the police patrol arrived. The police surgeon pronounced life extinct at . . ." Yellich consulted his notepad, "at eight A.M. CID called Dr. D'Acre."

"Ligature marks round the neck," Dr. D' Acre picked up her cue. "Suggests death by strangulation." She was in her forties, short hair, black, greying at the roots, no makeup save a trace of pale lipstick. "And the time of death, very reluctant to be drawn on that one, but a corpse has five stages: fresh, bloated, decay, post-decay, and dry, by which we mean skeletal. These corpses are both fresh, so death was a matter of hours ago."

"Found by a fella walking his dog," Yellich said. "I have his name

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and address and proof of ID if we need to talk to him again, but I don't think we will. He just saw what he saw and phoned three nines, said a guy in a blue jacket warned him of something but didn't say what, but something that made all the 'nighties' quit the park. The referrer didn't get the impression the man in the blue jacket was involved, just a bit detached with an unpleasant sense of humour."

"Any ID on the deceased?"

"Well . . . " again Yellich consulted his notepad, "they appear to have been stripped of all ID, no wallets or anything, no rings or watches that might have an inscription. Strange, really . . . leaving them like this, laid out, as if wanting them to be found, but removing all ID."

"Strange, all right," Hennessey conceded.

"But there was something."

"Oh?"

"In one of the pockets, an appointment card for a dental checkup. White's dental practice, second April at three-thirty P.M. Probably just stuck it in his pocket and forgot it was there, and whoever rifled his pockets missed it. Tried to phone them but all I got was an answering machine telling me what to do in an emergency and what their opening hours are. . . . " He glanced at his watch. "I'll phone them again in a minute or two, let them open the curtains and put the kettle on for that first vital, necessary cup of tea."

"Let's have a look at them, then." Hennessey stepped forward, underneath the blue-and-white tape, and peeled back the plastic sheeting just sufficient to expose the faces of the deceased. Both appeared to be in their forties and, allowing for postmortem stubble, were clean-shaven. Both had neatly groomed hair, and peeling the plastic back further he saw they appeared to be smartly dressed within limited means: jacket, tie, but threadbare. He replaced the sheet noting how similar they appeared.

Yellich walked to the edge of the park where he thought he'd get a better signal for his mobile. He phoned the dental practice. The receptionist was polite but firm. She would not give out such details over the phone, but she did agree to fax the information to Micklegate Bar Police Station for the attention of DS Yellich. As he was phoning, Dr. D'Acre walked out of the park and got into her red-and-white Riley and drove away. The bodies were removed on covered stretchers to the mortuary van, which then also drove away. When Yellich returned to Micklegate Bar Police Station he checked his pigeonhole and found that the dental appointment in question had been made in respect of one Charles Lovejoy, The Mount, Headon, York.

"I wondered." The woman seemed to be staring into the middle of the room, not focusing on anything. "When he didn't come home, I wondered." She wore a housecoat, beneath which a long night-

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dress protruded. Her hair was uncombed and hung over her left eye. She was clearly, to Hennessey and Yellich, still only half-awake and also in a state of shock: not the best frame of mind to be of assistance to the police.

"He was with another man, if indeed it is your husband, Mrs. Lovejoy. Would you possibly know who that would have been?"

"Did he look like my husband?"

"He does . . . did . . . yes." Hennessey spoke softly. He read the room: cluttered, unclean, a settee which had the sort of tacky quality about it which said "don't sit on me," which he hadn't noticed because of the gloom in the room and which now felt sticky beneath his trousers. He envied Yellich his caution and wisdom in remaining standing.

"That would be 'Bad' Charlie McQueen. They were so alike they were taken for brothers."

"Would you know McQueen's address?"

"No, but you would."

"Really?" Hennessey shot a glance at Yellich, then he turned again to Mrs. Lovejoy. "McQueen, you say?"

"Charles McQueen, he's not bad so much as sad. Always in trouble with the law since he was at school, but always petty stuff, never anything really big. Pathetic really is Bad Charlie, but he likes his nickname, makes him feel like a real gangster. He lives behind the railway station. Holgate? Is that the area?"

"Yes. You're not from York?"

"Manchester. Only been in this city for eighteen months. I wed for the first time at the age of thirty-five and I'm a widow at thirty-seven."

"If it is your husband."

"Oh, it'll be him. I knew when he didn't come home. He's always home."

"Does your husband work?"

"Unemployed. Chronic unemployment, that's his lot. Hardly had a job in his life. I mean, look at this . . . is this the house of a man with an income? Two Charlies, knew each other a long time. That McQueen, though, he was a bad influence . . . always knew no good would come of it, but they were inseparable. When they were together you couldn't get between them. Strangled, you say?"

"Yes . . . so it seems. Both men."

Mandy Lovejoy shook her head. "I'll get dressed. Do the identification."

Later she just nodded as she looked at the man through the pane of glass, neatly wrapped in bandages so that only his face was visible and who, because of some trick of light and shade, appeared to be floating peacefully in a void. "That's him," she said. "That's my man."

Criminal records showed "Bad" Charles McQueen to have accumu-

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lated a lot of track, but all, as Mandy Lovejoy said, petty stuff—drunk and disorderly, small-scale theft . . . no TV licence, driving whilst disqualified. "Made a career out of it." Hennessey handed the sheet of McQueen's track to Yellich.

McQueen's address in Holgate proved to be a neatly painted terraced house. Inside it was also neat and clean and tidy, wherein everything seemed to have its place, evidently including Mrs. McQueen. She was a small woman in Hennessey's view, very small, but was neat like her house, well dressed, as well as a small budget could allow. She responded to the news of her husband's death with floods of tears. It was some minutes before Hennessey realised he was witnessing floods of tears of joy and relief.

"He was a rat," she said. "My troubles started twenty years ago when I married a rat." She glanced up and then stood up and swept her hand along the mantelpiece, sending photographs and brass items crashing to the floor. Then she sat down again. "For twenty years I've dreamed of doing that." Then she yelled to the room, "Now make me pick it up . . . now make me tidy it . . ." Then she turned to Hennessey. "Like he was in the army . . . inspecting everything, ruled this house like a tyrant. We had two children, left home as soon as they could . . . and never came back."

"He had enemies?"

"Plenty. Me included."

"Any particular enemies? Anyone that would want to murder him?"

"Well, I wanted to murder him, that's one name for your list." She stood and wound herself into a lightweight summer coat. "Come on, let's get this identification over with. I've been praying for this day for twenty years. I'm going to bury him so I can dance a jig over his body."

The identification was, as Hennessey predicted, positive. Mrs. McQueen declined the offer of a lift home and left the hospital chuckling to herself, telling the officers that she was going to wet her whistle "good and proper."

Hennessey and Yellich sat in Hennessey's office. They sat in silence. Hennessey allowed his gaze to be drawn to a solitary figure walking the medieval wall of the city, a local man, Hennessey thought, not looking from side to side like a curious, excited tourist, but walking the walls as any citizen of York would, knowing that the walls are the quickest way to cross the city on foot. Then he turned to Yellich. "Two men," he said, "one not known to us . . . he isn't known?"

"Lovejoy? No, sir. No Lovejoy of that age or address."

"All right. One known to us, quite well, one not known. They looked alike, which may or may not be relevant, both murdered, at the same time, at the same location, placed side by side, and both

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murdered in the same manner, possibly by strangulation. Dr. D'Acre will be doing the postmortem this afternoon. I'll observe for the police."

"Very good, boss."

"So . . . make an observation?" Hennessey smiled.

"Well, it would have taken more than one man to murder them. One man couldn't have strangled both at once . . . and one man couldn't have carried them to where they were laid out."

"So who, what, are we dealing with?"

"Well, I don't suspect either wife."

"Nor do I. I think we'll wait until we hear what Dr. D'Acre has to say. So what are you doing for lunch?"

"Canteen, boss. Cheap."

"Yuck! But as you wish. I'll see you later." He stood and put on his straw hat and walked out of Micklegate Bar Police Station and walked the walls to Lendal Bridge and the fish restaurant, where he enjoyed breaded haddock with chips—much, much better than the food in the police canteen, no matter how inexpensive it was. After lunch he strolled the sun-baked city, mingling with the tourists and the street entertainers, and walked down the graceful curve of Georgian St. Leonard's Place. In St. Leonard's, he saw a red Rolls Royce waiting patiently in the traffic behind an open-topped horse-drawn carriage. In the Rolls Royce, in a matching red blazer, was Big John Meldrum, a huge man, shiny, utterly bald head, one henchman at his side. *Now there,* thought Hennessey, *there is one villain I want to put away. He is the biggest villain in the Vale of York, but he never gets his hands dirty. Not that I ever knew.* It was rumoured Meldrum even had diamonds embedded in his teeth, just for show. In the rear of the Rolls Royce sat a boy, about seventeen, a pale, frightened-looking youth with a sloping-back forehead, a pointed nose, and a very weak chin. He didn't appear to be in distress, but looked very clearly as though he wanted to be a long way away, anywhere but where he sat at that moment.

"They were stabbed to death." Louise D'Acre spoke softly but authoritatively.

"Not strangled after all?"

"Well, they were strangled. The ligature marks round their necks were pre-mortem, bruising like that is not possible after death." Louise D'Acre extended a slender arm to one of the bodies, which lay side by side on separate stainless-steel tables. "But that didn't kill them. Death was due to a single stab wound. Here and here." She pointed to a small cut underneath the left rib cage of each corpse. "That was made by a type of knife I believe is known as a stiletto. Very long and very thin. A small wound on the surface of the skin, and little mess because the bleeding was inter-

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nal." She nodded to the open abdomen. "All the blood drained into the stomach in both cases, where it congealed, as you see."

"Gangland," Hennessey hissed angrily. "Has to be."

"You think?" Dr. D'Acre smiled. She rarely smiled at him when on duty. Any attempt he made to smile when on duty was always frozen out.

"I think so." He didn't return the smile, knowing it would not be appreciated. "The calmness of it, the ritualistic nature of it . . . the laying of the bodies as laying a trophy, or as a warning. It all speaks of organised crime, and that means a cold trail. These people know how to cover their tracks. This is one to be placed in the Pending box, and if we get a break, we get a break. If we don't, we don't."

Yellich returned home early, earlier than usual. His wife hugged him with a powdery arm, and his son, now far too big to be picked up, slobbered a kiss over him and was keen to show him how he could spell the words "paper" and "pencil." He was proud of "pencil." It had taken him all week to learn to spell that word.

Hennessey drove home, too. He was met by an excited Oscar, who barked and ran in tight circles at his homecoming. He made a cup of tea and walked into the garden, where the ashes of his young wife had been scattered many years earlier, and told her of his day. He ate, fed, and exercised Oscar and then packed an overnight bag. He drove to Skelton, to a half-timbered mock Tudor house. He parked the car at the curb and walked up the crunching gravel drive and tapped gently on the door. It was opened by a woman who smiled at him, warmly. "Come in," said Louise D'Acre. "The children have settled. We can go straight up."

The remainder of that year passed without moment. Lovers of cricket delighted at the victory of England over the feared and formidable West Indies in the final test of the series at Headingley. The autumn brought rain; the Ouse swelled but the flood defences held, and York wasn't flooded. Yellich watched his son continue to thrive within his birth limitations, and Hennessey spoke to his wife daily, visited Louise D'Acre twice or thrice weekly, took an interest in his son's career at the bar, and remembered the birthdays of his grandchildren. It was, he recalled, two weeks before Christmas of that year that it happened, when the weather was cold, and the bright lights hung in the streets and the shops sold goods, mostly on credit, if the news was to be believed. It was then, that time of year, when he was at his desk, writing a report, that Yellich came and stood on the threshold of his office, tapped on the doorframe, and said, "Boss, I think you should hear this. Interview room number four."

Hennessey, curious, followed Yellich to interview room four. A young man sat in the room at the table next to a broad-chested man

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in a silk shirt and expensive-looking suit. The youth looked nervous, he had a distinct "pointed" face, and Hennessey knew he had seen him before, but couldn't place him. The youth looked frightened.

"This is Tom Cook," Yellich said, "and his lawyer, Mr. Sheridan."

"Of Sheridan, Sheridan, and March," said the broad-chested man. He had, by contrast, a full face, bearded, warmth and confidence in his eyes.

"Tom has just coughed to malicious wounding," Yellich said. "Nasty attack with a broken bottle."

"Well done, Tom." Hennessey smiled. "It's always best to play with a straight bat."

"Tom wants to plea bargain, boss."

"No deals! We don't plea bargain. I'm surprised at you, Detective Sergeant, our policy is plain: A guilty plea will earn a reduced sentence, and we inform the judge that the defendant has been of help in other issues, that will further reduce the sentence, but no plea bargains. That's up to the CPs anyway, but we will charge and send the papers to them."

"Well, my client hasn't exactly 'coughed' to anything, Mr. . . . ?"

"Hennessey."

"Mr. Hennessey. The tape has been switched off. This is off the record."

"I don't like talking off the record." Hennessey shot an angry glance at Yellich.

"Might be worth listening to this, sir."

"Very well, I'll listen." Hennessey remained standing.

"The case against my client cannot be proved." Mr. Sheridan spoke softly. "If you charge him, he will plead not guilty and you will lose the case. But his criminal record is such, and the nature of the crime is such, that it is likely that he will be remanded in custody pending trial, in which case he could spend as much as three years in jail."

"It's a slow-moving system," Hennessey growled. "I wish it was speedier at times."

"But my client fears jail. He has been in before and it was his lot to be victimised by the other inmates."

"Yes?"

"He does have information about a double murder which took place in this city during the summer."

"The two guys in the park," said Yellich.

Hennessey smiled and sat down.

"Thought you'd be interested, boss."

"I'm listening, Tom." Hennessey continued to smile.

"Those two guys in the park . . . one was a crook called McQueen." Tom Cook spoke earnestly, as if eager to please. "And the other guy, same age, needed cash. They stole a whole load of cocaine from Big Johnny Meldrum."

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So that's where I saw you, Hennessey thought, *in the back of Big John Meldrum's Rolls Royce, looking sick with fear.* The image had stayed with him.

"He has a big house outside York. Dogs. High fence, heavies to guard the place, minders to look after him."

"We know him. He is of considerable interest to us, and has been for a long time."

"They were murdered by Meldrum." Tom Cook looked directly into Hennessey's eyes. "They were not in Meldrum's league, out of their depth. Meldrum used McQueen as a gofer. McQueen got greedy, hatched a plan with the other guy to make it look like McQueen had been robbed of a load of coke he was delivering . . . but you could see through that plan with a glass eye and it didn't fool Meldrum any. That guy is serious. He's as mean as he looks."

"Go on."

"Meldrum had them both brought to his house, tied to a chair, cord round their necks, choking them till one of them broke and told Meldrum where the coke was. Meldrum said the first one to tell him where it was would live, the other wouldn't, but they both got it in the end. Once the coke had been recovered Meldrum murdered them, stuck a long, thin knife into them, just once each, under the rib cage. They didn't die quickly."

"They wouldn't, their blood drained into their stomachs."

"But I know where he keeps the blade. You could turn his house upside down and inside out and you wouldn't find it. But I know where it is. He didn't clean it and he didn't wear gloves. I saw it all. I was one of his gofers, too. Still am."

"My client, you see, gentlemen, is involved with Meldrum and he too is out of his depth. You have the authority to remand him for three years pending a trial you will not win, but the three years will be difficult for my client. He, on the other hand, witnessed a double murder and will direct you to corroborative evidence which will put Meldrum away for life. My client will make a statement, tell you where the knife is hidden, and . . . and, gentlemen, give evidence against Meldrum at his trial should it come to that."

"Very brave of you, Tom."

"It is exceedingly courageous, Mr. Hennessey, because his life will be at risk. He won't be safe anywhere." Sheridan paused. "Drop all charges, relocate my client to a different part of the U.K., in housing which is acceptable within reason, and give him a new identity. Then you'll get your statement, your corroborative evidence in the form of the murder weapon with Meldrum's fingerprints and the victims' blood all over it, and you'll get your strong witness for the Crown."

Hennessey turned and smiled at Yellich.

"Thought you'd be interested, boss." ●

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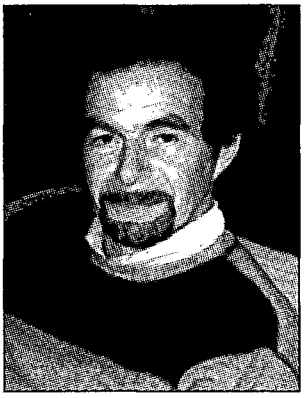
J. A. Konrath



Doug Allyn

Robert S. Levinson

2005 READERS AWARD

With special features in honor of the Ellery Queen centenary claiming space in all of the 2005 issues, there was a little less fiction in the year's lineup. Judging by the enthusiastic notes on many Readers Award ballots, however, readers did not begrudge the space borrowed from fiction, since it was devoted to such a deserving subject. As is appropriate in a year dedicated to Ellery Queen, though all three of 2005's winners made their *EQMM* debuts long after the last original work bearing the Queen byline appeared, all reflect in their winning stories some aspect of the legacy of Ellery Queen's fiction.

If there are enough degrees of separation in the chain of influence, the impact of a seminal writer is sometimes not recognized by those who follow. Our first-place winner, for instance, is especially noted for his vivid settings, especially his unforgettable portrayals of the towns and people of Northern Michigan. This attentive detailing of a small-town setting is reminiscent of Ellery Queen's Wrightsville novels: When we're finished reading we remember the place as much as, or more than, the mystery. It is certainly true to say that of "Wolf Woman Bay" by Doug Allyn (June 2005), this year's first-place winner, though we doubt that Mr. Allyn would count Queen as one of the writers who most influenced him. Incredibly, this is the eighth time a story by Mr. Allyn has finished in first place for this award, and the third year in a row that the prize goes to an entry in his Dan Shea series (where amateur sleuthing comes as naturally as hanging dry wall to a roughneck crew of construction workers). Mr. Allyn is a star by any measure in the world of short fiction, and his novel-length fiction has been making a splash lately, too. *Publishers Weekly* said of

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his recent novel *The Burning of Rachel Hayes* (Five Star), "Characters and plot are superior. . . . Allyn delivers a first-class crime tale."

Your choice for second place this year is a very deliberate homage to the classic authors of mystery fiction, and boasts a plot that's Queenian to the core. In "With a Twist" (December 2005) J.A. Konrath dazzles his readers with a multilayered "impossible crime"—impossible not only because it occurs in a locked room, but because the manner of death seems to defy physics. Mr. Konrath's series cop Jacqueline ("Jack") Daniels unravels the complex knots with characteristic wit and style. She's the creation of a Chicago-area author who made his fiction debut in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in the July 2004 issue. (See "On the Rocks.") In the interim, Mr. Konrath has had two novels published (*Whiskey Sour* and *Bloody Mary*), with a third, *Rusty Nail,* expected this June. He has also earned Anthony and Macavity nominations for best first novel, and won a Derringer for best short story. When he is not busy devising the diabolically clever mysteries that bring him these honors, Mr. Konrath's life revolves around his wife, several kids, and a dog named Jack.

As every mystery buff knows, Ellery Queen had his "Hollywood phase." How appropriate that third place in this centenary year should go to a tale steeped in that glamorous world. The Walk of Fame at Grauman's Chinese Theatre is perhaps the best-known of Hollywood icons. But when Robert S. Levinson takes a real historical incident connected to the walk and spins from it a contemporary tale of murder, in "Death Conquers All" (September/October 2005), those footsteps in cement lead where we least expect. Part whodunit, part quirky tale of suspense, the story is a good example of the L.A. author's unique style and sensibility. Of his latest novel, *Ask a Dead Man, Publishers Weekly* said, "Levinson . . . carries the soul of the Irish poets. . . . Only a dead man wouldn't relish this read." A new Levinson thriller, *Where the Lies Begin*, is due to be released by Five Star Press in May.

Congratulations to all of the winners, including the finalists listed below!

Fourth	"Blind Roads" by Clark Howard
Fifth	"The Cherries of Lucullus" by Steven Saylor
Sixth	"Tunnel Girl" by Jeffery Deaver
Seventh	"There Is No Crime on Easter Island" by Nancy Pickard
Eighth	(tied) "The Theft of the Empty Paint Can" by Edward D. Hoch
	"Shirley Hillman" by Pauly Nelson
Ninth	"Shooting Big Ed" by Loren D. Estleman
Tenth	"The Problem of the Secret Passage" by Edward D. Hoch

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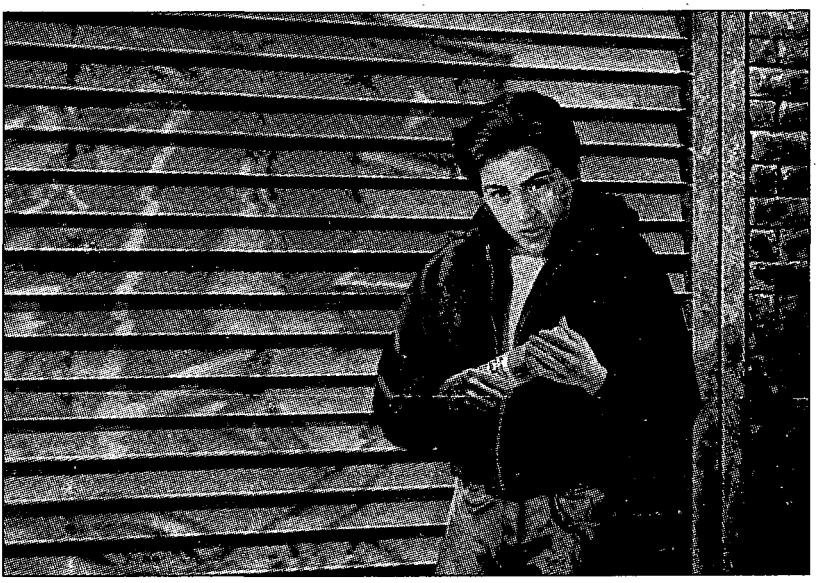

Art by Mark Evans

COLOUR ME BLOOD

by Jerry Sykes

The side of the building had been painted in a thin coat of white emulsion, but the solid colours of more than a decade's worth of graffiti still showed through the paint like blood vessels under pale Irish skin. In front of the wall, a tall scruff of a man with thick knots of dark hair was making shapes in the emulsion with a piece of charcoal. His name was Rob Blake, a local artist, and he had been commissioned by the local residents' association to create a mural on the side of the Community Centre.

Surrounding him in a loose arc, all ADD head jerks and hot feet, was a group of around ten children aged between twelve and fourteen, holding in their hands face masks and cans of spray paint in a rainbow of colours. The idea was that once the artist had laid out the basic outline of the mural on the wall, the kids would then fill in the larger shapes to create the solid cast of the image, leaving the artist to add the final details later.

Across the street from the Community Centre, Detective Sergeant Marnie Stone sat and watched from the open window of her old blue Saab. In the centre of the group surrounding the artist, little more than a short head taller than the children, she could see Kate Phillips, one of the hardier members of Camden's

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Social Services department and an old friend. After a couple of minutes, Marnie called out her name and stuck her hand in the air, but, like the children, Kate seemed fascinated with the workings of the artist, the fluid motion of his hand, the beats of creation, and appeared not to have heard. Marnie could not see much of what was happening through the forest of shuffling limbs, just the occasional glimpse of the hand leaking sinuous lines of soft carbon, and so she had no choice but to sit back and wait.

Marnie had read about the project in the local paper and was curious to see if it would lead to a reduction in crime on the estate, as had been promised in the tenants' association's pitch to the police and the council. There were a couple of faces that she knew for a fact were responsible for a string of robberies and muggings in the area, she had just not been able to gather sufficient evidence, and so at least a couple of old people would be able to walk home in peace tonight. But she would be fooling herself if she thought it would go further than that.

A few minutes later, the artist stood up to stretch his back and the spell he held over his audience was broken. Kate glanced around and saw Marnie watching them. She stooped and said something to one of the kids nearest her, and then walked over to the Saab. The closer she came, Marnie noticed, the deeper the lines that bracketed her mouth became. But then it had never surprised Marnie that social workers appeared to age faster than the rest of the world, including police officers.

"Hello, Marnie, what are you doing out here?" asked Kate, smiling. "You're not going to arrest Rob, are you?"

"You mean that vandal trying to make the estate a better place to live?" replied Marnie, reflecting the smile. "Sure, I just wanted to see who his accomplices were first . . ."

"Ooh, don't be cruel," replied Kate, resting her hand on the lip of the door.

"What's it going to be, anyway?" asked Marnie, pointing towards the Community Centre.

"A warning about the perils of drink and drugs," said Kate. "There's going to be the usual logo, Keep It Clean, and then a street scene with kids and families and stuff like that. I don't know, I think I also heard Rob say something about a large bin

Jerry Sykes's work has appeared once previously in *EQMM* ("Symptoms of Loss"; 4/2000) and he has had stories in a number of other magazines and anthologies, including *World's Finest Mystery Stories*. He is a two-time winner of the British Crime Writers' Association's Short Story Dagger. In early 2007 he will add a novel to his list of published writings. See *Lose This Skin* (Five Star Press). ¶

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with needles and guns sticking out of it or something. . . ."

"And here's me thinking Walt Disney was dead," said Marnie.

"Hey, don't knock it," Kate chastised her. "If it gives these kids some stake in the estate then it'll be worth it."

"Yeah, I know," agreed Marnie, glancing away. She still had her doubts, but she also knew that she would never be able to win an argument with Kate. She started the engine and put the car in gear. "Anyway, I better be getting back to the station. I just thought I'd drop by and see how you were getting on. . . ."

"Much better than I thought," said Kate, nodding. "There are far more kids here than I thought there would be. . . . Including one or two I never expected to see in a million years."

"Yeah, I know who you mean," said Marnie. "So just remember to count all the paint cans at the end of the night. . . ."

Kate gave her a look of mock admonishment, and then broke into a smile. "Go and chase some real villains," she said.

The children had been filling in shapes for a little more than ten minutes when the first argument started. Calum Breen, a short kid with dark hair and a pronounced lower lip that made him look like he was sulking all the time, a mask that suited his character to the ground, had been assigned a couple of letters at the end of the slogan, but what he wanted to do was something a bit more artistic, or something a bit more real, as he put it.

"Why can't I do one of the people, or even some of the background?" he asked, a sneer pushing his lip out further.

"Because that's just the way it worked out," replied Blake, wishing that Kate was still there with him. Five minutes earlier she had told him that she had to go and see a client on the estate but would be back in an hour. He was not used to dealing with a bunch of kids on his own and, although he was loath to admit it to himself, having her there made him feel safer.

"But I don't want to do the letters," replied Calum.

"Well, how about you just do one of the letters and then we move everyone around," said Blake. "That way everyone'll get to do a figure and a letter, or a bit of background, or whatever . . ."

"He's just scared of getting it wrong because he can't read," called out a kid in the centre of the group.

"There's no need for that," said Blake.

"Yeah, piss off," said Calum.

"Come on, let's not fight about it," said Blake. He could feel the group starting to slip out of his grasp, but he wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

The two kids shuffled around in the pack for a brief moment, alternating between hiding behind their colleagues and stepping out into makeshift clearings, before squaring up to one another. Blake waited until the last moment, fearful of wounding their

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pride, perhaps, and then stepped between them with his palms raised. And just stood there, still and silent, waiting for them to return to the growing spread of colour on the wall. Long minutes later, egos satisfied, the pair traded final insults and then broke up and returned to the task at hand. Blake folded his arms and waited to make certain that it was indeed all over, and then stepped over to watch Calum work. It did not take him long to realise that behind the brash tongue the kid had a natural talent and that perhaps he should give him a break and let him have a bit more input on the project. Trouble was, he would have to do it without looking like he was cutting out the other kids.

But fifteen minutes later, two minutes after the kids had traded shapes, Calum had another complaint.

"How come we're just doing a picture of the estate, anyway? It's pretty boring, don't you think? I mean, we live here all the time. Why can't we do something a bit more interesting?"

Blake sighed. "I thought we talked about this."

"What about a beach with horses running through the surf," suggested Calum. "I don't know, just something different . . ."

"I thought we agreed to do a mural of what we wanted the estate to look like," said Blake.

"Calum wants it to look like a building site with sand and shit," piped up a small kid from the centre of the group.

"I never said that," replied Calum, looking for the source.

"Clubbers sleeping off their highs from the night before," said another kid, his idea of a beach.

"No, that's not the kind of beach I mean," protested Calum, still looking for the source of the first voice.

"Grannies pumping coins into slot machines," suggested another, stretching the beach connection to breaking point.

"What the hell is wrong with you people," squealed Calum. "You've got the chance to bring a bit of colour into your lives and what do you do? Paint a cartoon version of what you've already got. Jesus, give it some imagination, won't you?"

"Imagine this," said one of the kids, giving him a finger.

"This is for all of us, not just for you," said another.

"Yeah, piss off and find your own wall," said yet another.

With faceless jibes coming at him from all directions, Calum felt a sickness rise in his throat. He took a deep breath and tried to shake it loose, dampen the tension, but it just seemed to make things worse. Seconds later, past frustration, he turned and pointed his can at the wall, pressed down on the button and held it there, as if that could relieve the pressure within himself. Dark blue paint bubbled and frothed on the wall and a thin trail soon snaked down through the white emulsion.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Calum," said Blake.

"I knew he'd turn it all to shit," said one of the kids.

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Calum continued to press down on the button.

"Give me the can," said Blake, his long fingers beckoning. But Calum just ignored him, and after one more polite request, Blake stepped forward and slammed the can out of his hand.

Calum snarled at him and watched the can as it bounced and rattled on the ground, and then stormed off across the estate.

Blake watched him go, and then ran forward a couple of steps and kicked the can into the wall as hard as he could.

Calum was still feeling a little out of sorts a few hours later. Sitting on the back of a bench in the centre of the estate with a couple of his friends who had not been part of the mural project: Match, like the name suggested—kids are nothing if not literal—tall and thin and with a shock of red hair, and Tusk, a regular-looking kid with a left canine tooth that poked out from between his lips even when his mouth was closed. The pair had been messing with his head ever since he had joined them on the bench after supper; word had travelled fast, and he was starting to get dark and pissed off, to believe that there was nowhere left to run. At one point, Match had accused him of losing his balls, and as the night had progressed and the more he had brooded on it, the more he had started to believe that Match might in fact be right. A couple of solutions had passed through his head—for an instant he had considered damaging the mural, but then he knew that he would be the main suspect—but nothing had made itself clear. Approaching midnight, he knew that he had to act soon to distance himself from the project and thereby restore his ego.

Taking a final drag on his cigarette, Calum flicked it out into the air and climbed down from the bench. He set off across the estate, breathing hard through his nose like a minotaur.

"Yo, what's happenin', man?" Match called out, standing up and following him. "What's going on, Calum?"

"Yo, wait up," cried Tusk, setting off after them.

Match and Tusk fell into step beside Calum, and the three of them headed up through Kentish Town before cutting a right into Dartmouth Park. Here the streets were quieter, darker, and there were fewer people about, less traffic. Calum led them through a labyrinth of back streets and alleys, streetlights sending shadows to track them, making no attempt to hide themselves, confident in their solid presence. Fifteen minutes after leaving the comfort of the estate, he led them behind a dark parade of shops that represented another kind of comfort.

The off-licence sat in the middle of the parade between a vet's surgery and a greengrocer's, and was well known to all the kids in the area as a cheap target. Calum himself had broken into it at least three times, three that he could remember, and almost every other kid he knew had burgled it at least once. It was like a train-

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ing ground for them, a rites-of-passage kind of place.

Match had been following Calum in glum silence, but as soon as he figured out where Calum was going, a broad grin had spread across his face as he knew his friend was coming back to them. It had been a bad time, with Calum either buried in paint and a social conscience or in despair. Match leaned into Tusk and told him the news, watched the other kid respond in the same manner.

"You going to hit the cashpoint," said Match, his nickname for the off-licence.

"Time I felt the muscle working again," replied Calum, clenching a fist in front of his heart.

"Yo, back in the world," said Tusk.

"Oh right, let's get it on," said Calum. He led them down the back of the buildings, their feet creating scuffles and echoes in the trash that carpeted the ground. At the back of the off-licence, he held out his right hand and gestured to Match with his left. Match lifted his jacket aside, pulled out a short-bladed knife from the deep thigh pocket in his cargo pants, and handed it to Calum. As Calum lifted the knife to jam it into the gap between the door and the frame, he noticed the line of dried blood at the base of the blade and an icicle threaded his spine. The blood was from where Match had stabbed some kid in the hand the week before when he had been too slow in handing over his mobile phone. Calum had seen the attack, and although he had been witness to unprovoked violence before, the cold action of his friend had shaken him more than he cared to admit. It had been an insight too far into the mental state that went with their situation.

The uncomfortable thought stilled him, and when the door creaked and opened a fraction, he thought for a moment that he must have popped it open himself without realising it and looked at the knife for a second in disbelief. And when it creaked again and opened a little further, a slice of light falling across the ground, he was still none the wiser, even when a look of keen surprise appeared on Match's face and his friend turned on his heel and fled. Understanding what was happening, Tusk too was soon up and off on his jaundiced feet into the darkness.

Stuck in that awkward space between thought and action, it was just when the manager's scared face appeared around the door that the truth of the situation hit Calum. Shaking the indecision from his limbs, he took off after his friends, but not before the manager had caught a clear glimpse of his startled face.

At nine o'clock the following morning, Rob Blake, the artist, and Kate Phillips, the social worker, were sitting on a threadbare sofa in the living room of the flat Calum Breen shared with his mother. DS Marnie Stone had been on the phone to Kate first thing: The owner of the off-licence had recognised Calum at once but because

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he had not committed an actual offence she was reluctant to speak to him; could Kate go round there and have a quiet word? "Sounds like I don't have much choice," Kate had replied, but here she was with Rob at her side for moral support.

Calum's mother was sitting in a matching chair, a cup of hot coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She looked as if she had a hangover, bloodshot pupils and red skin.

"So who else was there last night, Calum?" asked Kate. "The manager said he saw two other kids running off."

Calum twisted in his seat and said nothing.

"It was almost midnight," continued Kate. "Somehow I just don't think that you'd have been out there on your own at that time of night. Do you want to tell me who you were with, Calum?"

Again Calum said nothing.

"Was it Match and Tusk?"

At the mention of the names Match and Tusk, Blake glanced at Kate, a little surprised, and then turned to Calum.

"I thought you said you'd left those two behind when you signed on for the mural," said Blake, feeling a little hurt.

"Yeah, well, maybe if I'd been allowed to put something of my own in—"

"Is that what all this is about?" said Kate, pressing her hands between her knees. "A cry for attention?"

"You mean you jeopardised your freedom just because you didn't get your own way?" interjected Blake, incredulous.

Kate rested her hand on his forearm and tried to ease him back, but he pushed on regardless.

"If it really means that much to you, then I'm sure we could work something out," said Blake, feeling the soft touch of the hand on his arm fade. "It's one thing being a tortured artist, but there's no need for you to go and get into trouble over it."

"You've torn yourself away from those bad influences before," said Kate. "It'll be easier the second time around."

"I'll think about it," muttered Calum, and Kate knew then that that was as much as they were going to get from him for now.

Kate touched Blake on the arm again, and this time he knew that it meant something different.

"It'll be good to see you again," he said, rising to leave.

Under normal circumstances, stubborn pride would have kept Calum from the mural for at least another afternoon, but knowing that it would take no more than three sessions to complete, he understood he had no choice but to swallow that pride and return to the site that afternoon if he wanted to be a real part of it.

And so four o'clock found him walking across the estate with the other kids, together but apart. Without having to ask, the other kids intuited what had happened. Most of them had been witness

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to his original strop, and also knew his street reputation, and so knew better than to irritate him further. When the group arrived in front of the mural, Blake also tuned into the common mood and just handed Calum a can of paint with a smile and motioned for him to do as he pleased.

For two hours Calum worked in silent concentration, the shadow of the other kids staining his back like perspiration. And the following night he was there again, Blake impressed with his dedication and the sense of Calumness that he brought to the character of the mural, little touches that added a much-needed sense of humour—a man in an open window shaving the hair on the top of his ears, a woman in a tracksuit watching aerobics on TV with a cigarette in her mouth. At the completion, both Blake and the kids were pleased with how it had turned out. Not quite as it had been planned, but perhaps all the better for that.

As the kids were cleaning up, or rather sneaking off and leaving Blake to do the cleaning up, a tall black man in a crumpled suit approached the scene. He stood and stared at the mural, smiling, tilting his head from side to side, and then after a couple of minutes looked across at Blake.

"That's some piece of work," he said.

"The kids did a great job," agreed Blake.

"I like the little comic touches the best."

"You mean the figures in the windows?" said Blake, pointing.

"Yeah, those," said the man, whose name was Johnson.

"Yeah, I like those, too," agreed Blake, stuffing tins of paint into a canvas holdall. "A touch of original thinking."

"It wasn't part of the plan, then," said Johnson.

"That was one of the kids," admitted Blake, not too proud to give credit where due. "Nothing to do with me, I'm afraid."

"I think it was the kid with the fat lip," said Johnson, smiling and pointing at his own mouth.

"You mean Calum," replied Blake, reflecting the smile.

"And he lives here on the estate," said Johnson.

"In one of the blocks near Castle Street," said Blake.

"You think he'd be interested in a solo project?—that's if it's all right with you, I mean," said Johnson.

"Depends what you have in mind, I suppose."

"You know Carlo's, the cafe on Kentish Town Road?"

"I've been there a few times," said Blake. "Nice homemade fishcakes, if I remember right."

"The wife makes them," said Johnson, and then fell silent, regarding the mural once more. "It could be a nice place, a better place, but the trouble is I have a metal shutter that's forever covered in graffiti. If I clean it, then it's covered again the following night. I think the people who walk past at night and see the graffiti must think it's a bad place and decide never to go and eat

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there. You must understand what I mean. I've been thinking about what to do about it. . . . You think . . . You think Calum would be interested in helping me out?"

Blake thought about Calum and what he had brought to the project. "He's got some strong ideas of his own."

"But that's what I'm looking for," said Johnson. "I wouldn't know where to start if we had to do it ourselves. As long as I have some idea of what he's going to do beforehand. Perhaps if he had one or two ideas I could choose from . . ."

"And he'd be paid for the work, of course," said Blake.

"Whatever's the going rate," replied Johnson.

"All right, I'll ask him," said Blake.

For his shutter on Kentish Town Road, Johnson chose a cartoon version of his cafe with cartoon customers looking out at the real people passing on the street outside. At the rear of the cartoon cafe were caricatures of Posh and Becks tucking into large plates of pie and mash, fat bellies pushing at their cheap clothing and raw cigarettes burning in a saucer in the centre of the table. Most of the cafe's trade was during the week, and so Johnson shut the cafe for the weekend to allow Calum to complete the mural in time for opening the following week.

Just as he had learned from Blake, Calum started with painting the shutter in a coat of white emulsion and then sketching the basic shapes of the characters and the furniture with a piece of charcoal. Working hard, he had the outline of the design laid out in full ten minutes short of noon and so decided to have some lunch before starting with the paint. He walked to the newsagent's on the corner and bought a can of Coke and a cheese bagel in clingfilm, but the woman behind the counter rebuffed his offer of coins, telling him that she was pleased that Johnson was at last doing something to brighten up the area and that she was thinking of following his lead. She just wanted to see how it turned out first. Calum thanked her and told her to keep him in mind. Popping the top of the Coke, he stepped out onto the street and bumped straight into Match and Tusk.

"We've been wondering where you'd got to," said Match.

"Thought you might be avoiding us, like," added Tusk.

Calum ignored them and strolled back to the cafe. He sat on the step and unwrapped his bagel, started to eat. The other two followed him and stood on the edge of the curb facing him, holding onto a lamppost and swinging their feet in the gutter.

"You coming out with us tonight?" asked Tusk. "Finish off what we started the other night."

Calum presumed he was referring to the humiliating episode at the rear of the off-licence in Dartmouth Park, but he had no desire for a repeat performance and, besides, he had something else to

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keep him occupied now. He took another bite and continued to ignore them, looking off down the street towards Camden Town.

"What's the matter, can't you hear us or something?" asked Tusk.

"He must think he's too good for us now," said Match, his head poking out of his dark hood like a poisonous tortoise.

Still Calum ignored them, drinking from the Coke.

"I reckon the police must've put the frighteners on him or something," said Tusk.

"Turned him back into a child," agreed Match.

"Won't be the first time. Still, it's like riding a bike. He wants to get back in the saddle, it shouldn't be too hard . . ."

"If he leaves it much longer he's going to need those whatchamacallits, those little wheels on the back . . ."

"Stabilisers," said Tusk. "Kiddie wheels."

"If he leaves it much longer he's going to need stabilisers. . . ."

Calum listened to the barrage of jibes in silence. On the one hand it hurt him, his friends attacking him like that, but on the other he just wanted them to leave so that he could get on with the mural. He finished the bagel, drained the Coke, and then put the scrunched-up clingfilm into the open mouth of the can. He stood and walked across to the curb and stuffed the can into one of the bulging black bin liners piled there like boulders.

"You coming with us, then?" asked Match. "Finish what we started the other night. . . . You can hold the knife . . ."

"I have to finish the mural," said Calum, uncomfortable.

"That's all right, we can wait," said Tusk.

"It might be awhile . . ."

"We have to wait until it gets dark, anyway," said Tusk.

"I don't know . . . Perhaps some other time," said Calum.

"Come on," said Tusk, a note of pleading in his voice.

"Oh, forget him," snapped Match, stamping his foot. "He's not going to come with us, he's just pissing us about. He's gone over to the other side. Painting, for Christ's sake . . . I bet he's not even getting paid for it. . . ."

"That's not the point . . ." started Calum, frowning.

"Child," Match shouted him down, rattling his fist at the shutter. "Pissing about with a big fat colouring book . . ."

A smirk creased Tusk's face.

"What do we care," said Match. "You know if we get caught we're going to say that you were with us anyway."

This time DS Marnie Stone came to the flat herself. She said hello to Calum and his mother, accepted the offer of coffee, and then asked Calum where he had been the night before.

"I was here," muttered Calum, looking at the floor.

"You were here all night?"

"I finished working on the mural when it started to get dark and

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then I came straight back here."

"And what time would that have been?"

"I don't know," replied Calum, shrugging. "I suppose it must've been about nine or so. Quarter past . . . I don't know."

"You're sure about that?"

"Half-past, then," said Calum. "I don't have a watch but I'm sure it was no later than about half-past nine. . . ."

"You stop and talk to anyone on the way home?"

Calum shook his head.

"Or call in at any of the shops?"

Calum shook his head again.

"All right, let's come at it from another direction," said Marnie, looking out across the estate for a moment. "You know the old ironmonger's on Kentish Town Road? It's about two or three doors down from the cafe you've been working on . . ."

"Yeah, I know it," said Calum.

"You ever been in there?"

"I suppose I must've been at some point. Getting new locks and stuff after we've been broken into. . . ."

"So you'll be familiar with the layout of the place?"

"I suppose so," shrugged Calum.

"Does that include the office in the back?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The place was broken into last night, Calum," said Marnie, leaning forward in her chair. "A large amount of cash was stolen from the office. Cash and a lot of other stuff."

Calum kept quiet, averted his eyes.

"You know anything about that?"

Calum shook his head. "No."

"You're positive about that?"

"Sure I'm positive," muttered Calum.

"All right, then, what about Match and Tusk?"

"What about them?"

"They're your friends, Calum, your comrades in arms. You must know if they had anything to do with it. . . ."

"I haven't seen them in a couple of days," said Calum.

"You didn't talk to them last night?"

Calum shook his head again, glanced hard at Marnie in confirmation.

"All right," said Marnie, sighing. "Let's look at what we've got, shall we: A known thief starts working on a mural in a cafe down on Kentish Town Road and just a few hours later an ironmonger's shop a couple of doors down from there gets broken into—so that's just a coincidence, is it, Calum?"

"Suppose it must be," said Calum, shrugging.

"We like Match and Tusk for this one," said Marnie. "You case the place for them, Calum? You tell them how to get in?"

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Calum kept silent, his attention focussed on the floor.

Marnie shook her head and looked out of the window across the estate. "All right, I'll leave it there for now," she said after a short time, getting up to leave. "But just so you know . . . I don't think you were there last night, Calum, but I do think that your two friends were, and it's just a matter of time before I find the proof. If you don't want to help me then that's your decision. But when we do nail them, don't kid yourself that they'll think we figured it all out by ourselves. . . ."

Although he was at first pleased with himself for not telling the police that Match and Tusk had been around earlier the afternoon before, the following morning Calum awoke to find it troubling him like a burgeoning toothache. On the one hand he still felt a little proud that he had not offered up Match and Tusk to DS Stone, a solid feature of his culture, he knew, but on the other he knew that it was just a matter of time before she arrested them and that when she did so it was almost inevitable that he would be lumped into the gang as the third man. And although he did not like to think about what that might mean, at best he knew that he would not be allowed to continue with the murals.

The dilemma continued to trouble him long after he returned to school, but a couple of weeks later he saw his chance to get out of the situation on what he saw as his own terms.

On the strength of his work at the cafe, word spread and he was soon offered another commission, this time to paint a large mural on the side of a car wash at the foot of Camden Road. The wall faced the traffic coming down the hill, a huge area, and after agreeing to the design he set to work on it one weekend.

But just as Calum might have predicted, Match and Tusk turned up late on the third night that he was there. He had just completed the background and was about to start on the figures in the cars he had painted—the mural was on a side wall of the car wash and Calum had created a full-scale cartoon version of it as if the wall were made of glass: In the centre of the wall he had drawn a giant foam-and-rain machine with a grime-streaked car going in one end and a bright clean car coming out of the other—and the sight of his friends made his heart sink in his chest. But Match and Tusk seemed to have lost some of their fire, poking Calum with sullen and blunt jibes as if taunting him had become a bore, and it did not take him long to get rid of them. Watching them walk across Camden Road, Calum felt a smile touch his face.

But it was a brief success: The following morning Detective Sergeant Stone was on his doorstep once more, the electrical store two doors down from the car wash having been burgled the night before. She went at him harder this time, refusing to believe that he had had nothing to do with it. And the harder she went at him,

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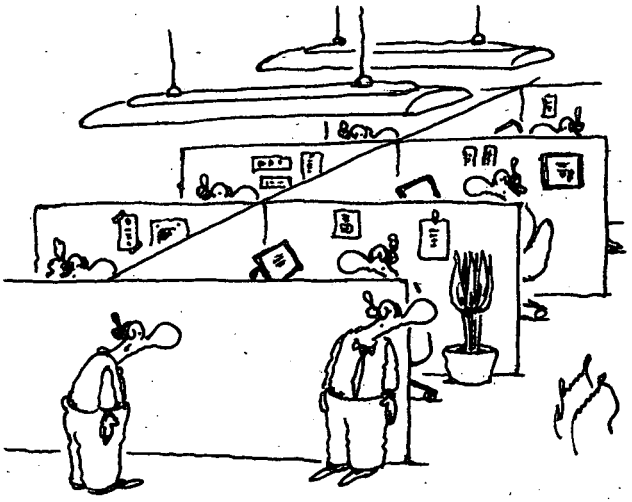
the more Calum dug in his heels. But even as he did so he felt something stirring deep inside, something far deeper than a cultural mistrust of the police and a refusal to grass. This time he knew that it was nothing less than fight or flight.

Ten minutes after Stone left the flat, Calum returned to the car wash to complete the details in the mural.

A little before two o'clock the following morning, chasing up on a call that had come in to the station, DS Marnie Stone pulled up in front of the mural with anger and sadness in her heart. Someone had made a good attempt at defacing it, scratching and rubbing different colours of paint across the artwork, but from what she could still make out, the mural looked to be of a police car chasing another car through the car wash. And after taking in some of the finer details the message was made clear to her: Calum was giving her the people she was looking for. In the front car were two clear characters, their features a little smudged but still recognisable: a match with human features and another face with one huge tusk curling out of its mouth. But Calum had not been clever enough, and after his old friends had seen his latest artistic efforts they had meted out their own retribution. Calum had been nailed to the wall where he had painted the chasing police car. His feet were hanging in the air about three feet from the ground and his head rested on his chest in a thick splash of blood. For a moment Marnie had the horrific thought that perhaps his tongue had been cut out, but when she climbed out of the car for a closer look she was relieved to see that he was still breathing and that he had in fact been silenced with a cork rammed in between his bloodied and swollen lips. ●



"There's a thin line between micromanagement and stalking, Danvers."

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The Ripper Prince

by James Powell

In this Ganelon adventure, one of the most persistent rumors surrounding Jack the Ripper is addressed: that he was really a member of Britain's royal family. "The member of the royal family who is sometimes mentioned as a Jack the Ripper suspect was the Duke of Clarence," Mr. Powell says. But in this story it's Queen Victoria's son Bertie.

In April of 1899 Ambrose Ganelon II, dressed for travel and carrying a suitcase, entered the second-floor library at 18 bis rue Blondin to say goodbye to Signor Vitelli, his houseguest, who sat working at the long table strewn with photographs.

Several years before, traveling through Europe in disguise with a horse and caravan, Ganelon had taken these pictures of the Continent's greatest criminals, men possessing such well-developed bumps of vanity that the appearance of a photographer's wagon brought them flocking in their finest gold chains and finger rings to stare defiantly at the photographer's birdie as if it were honest society itself. Ganelon's apparatus of lens and mirrors took a full-faced portrait and a left profile, photographs that would later serve Europe's prefectures of police well.

Vitelli was a physiognomist and a student of Giovanni Della Porta, whose celebrated *Fisonomia dell' Huomo* published in Venice in 1668 compared men's faces to those of beasts. He had come to examine these photographs because he believed the criminal's features, above all, are closest to the animal and that therefore physiognomy was a worthwhile study for the policeman. Vitelli's ideas had led to some lively dinner conversations.

Ganelon's guest held up the photograph of Tibor Nachtigal, the Austrian slow poisoner, a man with a large brow, small eyes, and a hard, compressed mouth set in a heavy jaw. "This gentleman eluded me for some time," said the physiognomist. "But I have him at last. He is the urus, a kind of wild European bull now quite extinct."

"But of course, Vitelli," said Ganelon, impressed by the comparison. He added, "And so is Nachtigal. Extinct, I mean." He made a single chopping motion with the edge of his hand. "He was executed in Prague two years ago."

Bidding Vitelli farewell, the detective turned to leave when the telephone rang on the wall by the door. Ganelon unhooked the earpiece and spoke into the cone of the receiver. He did not recognize

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the voice, but the words he heard were very familiar. He hung up before the end and went back out into the hallway, shaking his head. He remembered the first of these annoying telephone calls. A voice had asked, "Sir, is your grandfather clock running?" Now it so happened that Ganelon had just had the large clock that stood guard in the third-floor living quarters hallway sent out for repairs. Thinking the clockmaker had asked an assistant to call to see if the clock was operating correctly, Ganelon had answered, "Yes, it is."

"Then shouldn't you go catch it?" asked the now laughing voice, and the line went dead.

At the time, Ganelon remembered smiling to himself at the image of the streets of San Sebastiano filled with grandfather clocks at a running waddle with their owners chasing after them. But several times since then other voices had telephoned to inquire about his grandfather clock. Now he was no longer amused.

Remarking to himself that the history of science and invention was a necklace with many a prank in it, Ganelon hurried off to the railway station.

An envelope with an English stamp had come in the morning mail. Inside, Ganelon found a silver sixpence bearing the likeness of the young Queen Victoria. The back had been ground smooth and then inscribed with the initials "AG" in a light cursive of molten silver. The coin was a love token. Every country fair had someone who could make you one and pierce it so it could be worn on a chain. Fifteen years before, Ganelon had placed the mate to this love token marked with the initials "VR" around his dead father's neck just before the coffin lid was closed over him. (Ganelon's mother, with the charity that had characterized her life, only commented that she was queen of the kitchen and empress of 18 bis and that was enough for her.)

Ganelon immediately telephoned the railway station for a schedule of trains to Paris and on to Calais. For he had promised his father that should he ever receive a similar love token in the mail he would proceed at once to London and put himself completely at the service of the sender.

The railroad people informed him that a "Special" stood waiting for him on the tracks at that very moment. So Ganelon made the trip to Calais in splendid isolation, arriving just in time to board the night ferry. The next morning he was met at the gangplank by Captain Ernest Childers, one of Queen Victoria's equerries, who escorted him to the railway station and another "Special" for London.

Ganelon judged Childers to be in his late thirties although his round boyish face and fair hair and moustache gave him the appearance of being younger. While the countryside slid by, the detective and his traveling companion ate a substantial English breakfast. During the meal Ganelon had the peculiar impression

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that the equerry was quietly sizing him up like a hangman measuring his next customer.

Afterwards, Childers pushed his chair back, took a small bulldog pipe from his pocket, and filled it with tobacco.

"Did you enjoy your service in South Africa?" asked Ganelon.

"Indeed so," came the reply. "All this talk of war is foolishness. The Boers are farmers, not soldiers." Here he stopped and gave Ganelon a quizzical look. When the detective nodded at the pipe, the kind preferred by the Boer settlers, Childers's face brightened with understanding.

Ganelon smiled to himself, amused by the connection between war and tobacco. The Napoleonic wars had knocked out the snuff box and replaced it with the short cigar. The British had learned about the cigarette from the Russians during the Crimean War. And now the British were taking up the Boers' bulldog pipe. Ganelon was not as sanguine about the South African situation as Childers.

"Do you miss active duty?" asked the detective.

The Englishman thought for a moment. "I'm not quite sure," he said. "My father served as equerry before me. He was a personal friend of Prince Albert, the queen's late consort. But he came to the post with many accomplishments behind him while I still dream of new worlds to conquer." For a moment Childers's face took on a faraway look.

Then the train passed a small station and Childers gave the platform his careful attention. And the next station. And the next. At last Ganelon had to ask the man what he was looking at. "The signboards which advertise various products," said Childers. "I think they have great potential. In a business sense. One day I would like to form a company which would offer its clients signboards presented with more dash and imagination than Keen and Colman."

When Childers spoke of worlds to conquer, Ganelon had thought he meant Samarkand or deepest Africa. But he had to admit that the mustard rivals' ubiquitous signs were pedestrian, the first with its name in yellow letters on a black background, the second black on yellow. "Well, if you do," said Ganelon, "I hope you don't have both these companies as your clients."

When Childers asked why not, Ganelon gave his long smile and replied, "Scripture forbids it. No man can serve two mustards."

Childers led Ganelon deep into Buckingham Palace until they reached a gilded room with an elaborately coffered ceiling and a pleasant bay of windows. His guide told him that it had once been the queen's sitting room. As a boy he'd come there with his father and had been fascinated by a birdcage topped by a fishbowl that stood on a piano there. But now the room was used for receiving guests privately.

In a moment Queen Victoria entered the room looking as sturdy

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as a small turnip in spite of her age. Her widow's black stood in contrast to her gilded surroundings. In Ganelon's talks with Vitelli over dinner, the Italian had mentioned John Varley's book *Zodiacal Physiognomy,* where it was maintained that people resemble in some fashion the sign under which they are born. Ganelon was far from sure what that meant. Cancer the crab would be easy enough. And he could imagine a Libra being a person with eyebrows that went up and down like a balance. But Ganelon had looked up Victoria's sign. She was a Gemini, the Twins. And how could one person be two? Unless her widow's weeds and the quiet sadness in her face represented her other half, her lost Prince Albert.

Childers presented Ganelon to the queen and left the room. Victoria said, "You were kind to come on such short notice, Mr. Ganelon." Then she held out her hand. "Before we begin, the item I sent you, I wish to have it back. It is a memento of a very happy incident of my youth long before I met my beloved husband Albert."

Ganelon set the love token in her palm. Her hand closed over it and disappeared into her small black reticule.

"Mr. Ganelon," she repeated, leaving him with the distinct impression she liked to say the name, "did your father ever explain the circumstances which led to our exchange of—items?"

"He did not, ma'am," said the detective.

"Then let me say that in the second month of my reign, some sixty years ago, your father's archrival, Dr. Ludwig Fong, in one of his schemes to rule the world, had me kidnapped and replaced me with a look-alike, his niece Abigail Fong-Smythe of the English branch of his family. Do you know of them?"

Ganelon indicated he did. The Ganelons kept close watch on all the Fongs. From offices in Paris the Fong-Smythes operated a chain of low newspapers throughout England and Dragon House, a publisher of sensational books.

"I'm told her resemblance to me was extraordinary," continued the queen. "All I remember is entering a room in the palace to have a burlap bag thrown over my head and a hand clasp my mouth. Then my outer garments were taken and, bound and gagged, I was lowered from a window to a waiting carriage. It was Abigail who walked from that room in my place.

"The crime might have gone undetected. But Lord Melbourne remarked on a certain earthiness in his young queen's sense of humor and an unfamiliar bray in her laughter. He called in your dear father to investigate. Ambrose discovered what had happened and at great personal risk he rescued me from the slave-pens of Timbuktu where Fong had sent me." The memory of the place caused the queen to lay the back of her hand across her brow. "Oh, the noise and the heat!" she said. "And how people poked at one through the bars of the cage! But your father saved me and brought me back to England. Abigail and the Fong-

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Smythes fled to the Continent and I resumed my proper place."

"A happy conclusion, ma'am."

Victoria inclined her head in agreement. "But that is not why I asked you here," she said. After a pause the queen asked, "You remember Jack the Ripper, of course."

Ganelon started. Who could forget the madman who killed and mutilated eight women in London's Whitechapel ten years before and escaped the law? "Don't tell me the killer has resumed his bloody career."

"Thank heaven, no," replied the queen. "But did you know that the Ripper's reign of terror ended just about the time my eldest son Bertie, Albert Edward the Prince of Wales, left on a trip to Paris?"

"I did not, ma'am," said Ganelon. "A coincidence, I am sure."

Victoria's voice turned sharp. "Of course it was a coincidence," she said. After a moment she continued in a gentler voice, "Even so, it was remarked upon. The gutter press even dared to wonder if Bertie's return would mean a resumption of the Ripper killings.

"But I've only myself to blame for much of what followed. You see, on the eve of his trip I chastised Bertie for his stiff and haughty manner in his dealing with our subjects. 'For goodness' sake,' I told him, 'loosen up a bit. Bend a little. Smile. Try not to be such a prig.'

"Well, during his stay in Paris my son took his mother's words to heart. His first day back in London Bertie even took a ride in an open carriage sporting this foolish grin. When the people saw him and began to cheer he stood up, doffed his hat, and blew kisses to them. Several times he ordered the carriage to stop and descended, shaking hands with the crowd and chucking the children under the chin. Was it any surprise that some began to doubt this man was the aloof prince they knew?

"From there it was an easy step to the story that Bertie had committed Jack the Ripper's heinous murders, been apprehended by the police, and, wearing a black mask to conceal his identity, had been tried by a secret court. Convicted, the story went, he had been confined to an asylum for the criminally insane and some grinning look-alike put in his place."

The queen's story left Ganelon speechless.

"Help me, Mr. Ganelon," continued Victoria. "And quickly. I am an old woman. These rumors could destroy any chance of Bertie succeeding to the throne."

"Mere rumors, ma'am?" protested Ganelon.

Victoria shook her head. "There is nothing 'mere' about them," she replied. "You will see. Tonight I invite you and Captain Childers to a very special social event where you will learn how very deeply these stories pervade the minds of our common people."

Ganelon dined with Childers in his quarters. Over preliminary whiskeys and soda the equerry pointed out the signed photograph

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of Albert the Prince Consort on the mantel, a gift to Childers' father. It showed the prince in a frock coat with a corsage in his buttonhole, holding a cane in his left hand. "This was my father's most valued possession," he said. "When confronted by a social situation where he was unsure how to proceed, my father always asked himself what Prince Albert would have done and he never came out wrong."

Childers also told Ganelon that the evening's social event was a costume ball and that they should both consider themselves honored to be invited. "The guests are restricted to members of a certain secret society within the palace," he explained.

After dinner Ganelon was taken to his own rooms where he found his costume laid out for him. Childers had said it was the queen's idea that he go dressed as a popular fictional detective of the moment in a tweed suit with Knickerbocker trousers, a deerstalker hat, and an Inverness cape. There was also a calabash pipe whose tobacco so reeked of old Persian slipper that Ganelon chose to carry it unlit, cradled between a thumb and forefinger. Examining himself in the cheval glass, Ganelon had to admit that Childers had taken his measurements well when he sized him up on the train.

When Childers arrived to take him to the ball the equerry's own costume quite filled the doorframe. The queen had decreed Childers go as a guardsman sentry in a tall bearskin hat. The outfit included a striped sentry box, a thing of wire and canvas supported by a yoke over his shoulders.

The affair took place in the high-ceilinged Green Drawing Room. At one end stood a broad refreshment table decorated with flowers. From behind the curtain at the other the orchestra was tuning its instruments.

In between, a most extraordinary collection of guests awaited the queen's arrival. Among them were several pearly king costermongers and their wives, two ragged little boys with bootblack boxes on their shoulders, and several women in flower sellers' shawls with baskets of violet nosegays.

A man Ganelon first took to be a headhunter wearing his terrible shrunken trophies on a chain around his neck turned out to be a Punch and Judy showman decked out with his cast of hand puppets. Another man wore a thick overcoat and a curious stovepipe hat pierced about with as many round holes as a Swiss cheese. The placard on his back announced him to be King of the Black Bug Exterminators Without Harmful Poisons. When he saw Ganelon reading his sign he opened his vast coat and whistled to demonstrate. Immediately young hedgehogs peeped from the holes in the man's hat and the many pockets in his coat lining. Then his wife used sugar tongs to reward each creature with a black bug from a fine-meshed metal cage she carried over her arm.

On the edge of the crowd an old crossing-sweeper in a broken-brimmed hat was demonstrating his tip-earning broom work by

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pretending to sweep the flickering light from the chandeliers into the darker corners of the room.

A musical flourish from the orchestra silenced everyone. In a moment Queen Victoria entered. Amidst all the bows and courtesies she motioned Ganelon to her side. "In days of old," she told him, "rulers like Haroun al-Raschid used to visit Baghdad's lower town in disguise to discover if the ordinary people considered themselves governed well or ill. But with my face on every coin and postage stamp I can go nowhere anonymously. Instead I send out through the city select members of my household—I call them the Buckingham Palace Irregulars—lords- and ladies-in-waiting and pageboys, all masters of disguise and mimicry, to read the hearts of the ordinary people. Tonight you may ask them what those hearts say."

Now the queen led Ganelon down the line of guests, introducing him to the costermongers as Lord and Lady This and Lord and Lady That, who greeted the detective with a cheery "Guv" or "Ducky." The Punch and Judy man, who was the Earl of Something, shot him a wink. The young bootblacks, who were the Honorable Chalk and the Honorable Cheese, tugged their forelocks and looked critically at the shine on Ganelon's shoes.

Afterwards the queen left Ganelon and took her place in an armchair on a low dais. "I declare this, the Eighteenth Annual Buckingham Palace Irregulars' Costume Ball, well and truly open," she said.

The first dance was the traditional quadrille. As Ganelon and his partner, the bug exterminator's lady, waited for their turn she assured him that, indeed, the people she met as an Irregular believed that Bertie had committed Jack the Ripper's crimes and was now confined to an insane asylum. She even named the institution of confinement. It was the Criminal Asylum at Norwich, where a whole ward of patients believed themselves to be the Prince of Wales.

When the waltzes began, Ganelon returned the lady to her exterminator husband and spent the next hour talking to any guest who was not at the moment dancing. The woman's story was confirmed on every side. The crossing-sweeper further informed him that the common people believed another inmate of that ward had been chosen to act as the prince's double. This impostor was always followed by a carriage of the Black-Maria sort filled with asylum warders with strait-waistcoats over their arms ready to act should the impostor deviate from his instructions or alter the speeches written for him.

The Punch and Judy man, who followed the theatrical news, said that journals like *Backstage* or *Playland* were now regularly covering the double's public appearances with criticisms of his acting and use of makeup.

When Ganelon visited the refreshment table where the two Honorable shoeshine boys were demolishing a chocolate cake,

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young Chalk even showed Ganelon a Dragon House penny-dreadful entitled *The Ripper Prince,* whose lurid cover depicted a man wearing the regalia of the Order of the Garter, knife in hand, stalking a woman down a dark street.

Ganelon drew off by himself to a corner to make something of all this. Clearly the Fong-Smythes, operating their gutter-press empire from abroad, had been waiting to revenge themselves on the British royal family. Had Jack the Ripper given them that opportunity? Or had they played a more direct hand? There was talk of the Ripper's skill with the knife. And wasn't Rupert Fong-Smythe professor of surgery at the École de Médecine in Paris? Ganelon made a mental note to look into the man's whereabouts during the Ripper's heyday.

And here was the paradox. Having failed to palm off their Abigail as a counterfeit Queen Victoria, the Fong-Smythes had set about to convince the English underclass that the real Prince of Wales was an impostor. Over the last ten years they had entangled the popular imagination in their web of lies and insinuations. What could Ganelon do in a mere few days to foil a plot so long in the making?

Then he saw moon-faced Childers standing across the dance floor in his sentry box looking for all the world like the grandfather clock in the third-floor hallway at 18 bis rue Blondin. And suddenly this gave the detective an idea. He went over to Childers and explained what he had learned from the Irregulars.

The man did not seem surprised. "We've all heard a few of those stories," he said with a smile directed, Ganelon was sure, at the credulity of the masses.

Then Ganelon described what the Fong-Smythes had really been up to and the violent social unrest it could provoke when the queen died and a Prince of Wales so many believed to be bogus tried to ascend the throne.

Childers turned pale with alarm and burst out, "But this could mean the end of our beloved monarchy. We have to do something!"

"We will," Ganelon assured him. "First we will ask the queen to send the Prince of Wales abroad for a bit. Then we must bring this whole Ripper Prince business out into the open."

Childers shook his head. "I don't understand."

Ganelon asked him, "Does this British sense of fair play I've heard so much about really exist?" Childers assured him that it did. Ganelon continued, "Then if he is Jack the Ripper or not, doesn't the Prince of Wales deserve a public trial like any other Englishman?"

Childers knit his brow in incomprehension.

"Here's our job," said Ganelon. "We must convince enough people that a great miscarriage of justice has taken place to prompt a parliamentary inquiry."

"But that could take years," insisted Childers.

"Not if we use modern technology," replied Ganelon.

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The next day Childers called from the palace and commandeered several public cabinets at Telephone House. The Irregulars were eager to be part of the endeavor. Ganelon coached them about the questions they were to put to the people they called. "First time around you'll ask if they think we have the Prince of Wales in the Criminal Asylum at Norwich. If they say no, as most probably will, you'll ask, 'Are you sure about that?' and hang up. That'll give them something to think about. Others may say they don't know. Then you ask, 'Well, shouldn't you find out?' and hang up. We'll let them stew in the good old British sense of fair play for a bit. Like Captain Childers here, I'm sure they've all heard a rumor or two about the Ripper Prince.

"Then we call them back. This second time around some, if only a few, are going to say, 'Yes, we do have Prince Albert in the Criminal Asylum at Norwich.' That's when you say, 'Then shouldn't we let him out?' That'll get the groundswell going. And we'll keep calling until we get solid results."

The Irregulars broke up into teams and went through the London telephone directory and made trunk calls all around the country. In the course of the first few days they focused these calls considerably. They found it better to call during mealtime when the family was gathered together at table. Also, as the Honorable Chalk (or was it young Cheese?) pointed out, the term the Criminal Asylum at Norwich only confused the people on the other end of the line. Most knew the place better by its initials, the CAN.

By the beginning of the second week, letters to the editor appeared in *The Times* of London and respectable people were discussing the matter on the street. By the week's end a motion had been placed before the House of Commons calling for an official inquiry into the rumors that the Prince of Wales had been imprisoned in the Norwich facility without due process.

Within days, a board of inquiry visited Norwich and interviewed those inmates of the ward in question who had been admitted to the facility immediately after the Ripper killings and the supposed secret trial. These they eliminated for a variety of reasons. (One, for example, spoke nothing but Welsh. This combined with the fact that none of the other inmates spoke a word of that language went to the heart of his claim to be the true Prince of Wales.)

The official inquiry made public its report that Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, had never been confined to the Criminal Asylum at Norwich.

A rumor persisted that an inmate who arrived within the proper time frame had escaped not long afterwards, prompting the story that the queen's people had abducted the Prince of Wales from the hospital to hide him in plain view as his own double, a story so absurd that even Dragon House could make nothing of it in the

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penny-dreadful line.

When Queen Victoria's Bertie returned from his trip abroad as his haughty old self, England breathed a sigh of relief and the tales of his being an impostor were forgotten completely. Ganelon returned home to San Sebastiano with the queen's warmest thanks.

The detective kept up a correspondence with Captain Childers for the next few years. The man's regiment was soon called back to South Africa by the outbreak of the Boer War. With the close of hostilities, Childers's dream of new worlds to conquer took him to New York, where the kind of advertising billboard work he was interested in was already a reality. Then he settled in North Carolina and went to work in the publicity department of a large tobacco company about to introduce a new pipe tobacco in a convenient pocket tin. They brought Childers in to come up with an elegant name for the product, something to appeal to the carriage trade. Ganelon was not surprised when Childers chose to call the pipe tobacco "Prince Albert," in honor of his father's friend and Queen Victoria's beloved consort.

A few months later, the detective passed between the twin cigar-store Indians flanking the door to Chez Rick, the American-style tobacco store on the rue de Rigolo, and entered the spittoon-littered premises. Old Vitelli the physiognomist had recently written from Naples asking Ganelon to send him an American Indian peace pipe for his grandson, who was in love with the Wild West.

As Ganelon stood examining the beribboned pipes in the counter display case the telephone on the wall rang. With a smile to his famous customer the proprietor put the receiver to his ear. "Chez Rick," he said. "Rick speaking." Then, after a moment, he hung up the receiver and turned his scowling face to Ganelon. "It's been like this all month," he said. "Wiseacre children of American tourists, they call up and ask if I've got Prince Albert in the can." The tobacconist gestured to a shelf of dark red tins decorated with a black-and-white photograph of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, a picture the detective remembered having seen before. "When I say, 'Yes, I have,' they laugh and say, 'Then shouldn't you let him out?'"

Ganelon looked away in embarrassment. Of the many pranks in the necklace of science and invention, this one appeared to be of his own making.

Just then another customer approached the counter. Ganelon recognized him as an American by his celluloid collar and the stylographical pencil in his pocket.

"Do you have Prince Albert in the can?" he asked.

Monsieur Rick gave the man a dark look. Then through clenched teeth he replied, "Yes, we do."

To Monsieur Rick's great relief and Ganelon's, the American said, "Fine. I'll take one." ●

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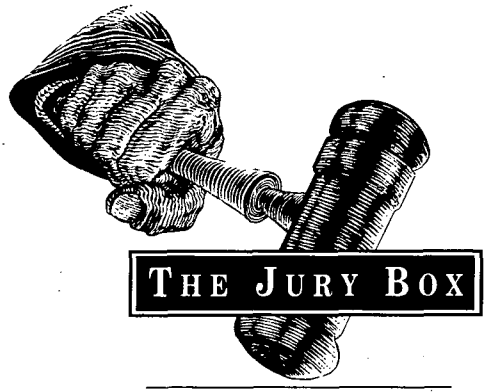

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Dennis Lynds, who died in 2005 at age eighty, was among the best and most prolific practitioners of detective fiction of the past forty years. What may be his last book is notable for the pleasure of the pulp-style narratives but even more for its snapshots of the writing life and the development of a major talent.

*** Dennis Lynds writing as Michael Collins: *Slot-Machine Kelly: The Collected Private Eye Cases of the One-Armed Bandit,* Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. The billing is ironic: Though the Collins byline would become more famous, these 13 stories, dating from the 1960s and all but one from *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine,* were originally published as by Lynds. The honest and frequently self-critical story notes touch on the abandonment of a Watson narrator, why one of the stories was written too hastily, and Kelly's gradual evolution into the more serious one-armed shamus of Collins's novels, Dan Fortune, whose Edgar-winning debut, *Act of Fear* (1967), was expanded from the last story in the book.

**** P.D. James: *The Lighthouse,* Knopf, $25.95. This time, the threatened institution (a James specialty) is a private island off Cornwall that has become an R-and-R destination for weary VIPs. A widely hated novelist is murdered, and the isolated setting makes for a typically excellent closed-circle whodunit for Adam Dalgliesh and his team, with an enthralling cast of suspects and clues to the killer broad and fair enough to be interpreted by armchair sleuths more alert than this one.

**** Thomas H. Cook: *Red Leaves,* Harcourt, $23. Photoshop proprietor Eric Moore's seemingly perfect life all starts to unravel when an eight-year-old girl disappears from her home on a night his teenage son had babysat her. This grim study in suspicion, loss, and multigenerational family relationships explodes artificial distinctions between literary and category, character- and plot-driven fiction. As in earlier novels, Cook doesn't "transcend" the

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crime-suspense genre but works within it brilliantly, and while firmly based in character, this is also a gem of construction.

*** Stephen King: *The Colorado Kid,* Hard Case, $5.99. Told mostly in dialogue, between two veterans of a small Maine weekly and the young woman they are training in the journalist's art, this understandably controversial novel makes for compelling reading: The author has a matchless narrative gift, and the characters are beautifully drawn. It sets a tantalizing mystery puzzle and examines it from all angles with near Queenian thoroughness, and it makes valid points about news media and human nature. But it will help to know two things going in: this is not a detective story but an *anti*-detective story, and it does not fit the hardboiled fiction noir category in which its publisher specializes. If King had chosen to solve the case, you could even call it a cozy.

*** Walter Mosley: *The Wave,* Warner, $22.95. What starts like a ghost story—Errol Porter gets late-night phone calls ostensibly from his ten-years-dead father—morphs into a wild science-fiction adventure in which the Los Angeles computer expert turned potter must save a superior alien race from a sinister government agency. There's plenty of allegory, symbolism, and political commentary, but they don't get in the way of a fast-moving thriller plot with romantic and criminous interludes.

*** Maddy Hunter: *Hula Done It?,* Pocket, $6.99. Iowa tour leader Emily Andrew takes her senior-citizen charges on a Hawaiian Island cruise, resulting in a *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*-style treasure hunt. You may anticipate the solution, but the attraction of this series is the humor—farce, slapstick, and situational—that is somehow sustained over 300 hilarious pages.

*** Mat Coward: *Open and Closed,* Five Star, $25.95. London cops Don Packham and Frank Mitchell look into the murder of an octogenarian activist during the occupation of a public library threatened with closure. The book offers the author's customary humor, sociopolitical messages, and nimble manipulation of plot, characters, and language.

*** Ralph E. Vaughan: *Sherlock Holmes and the Coils of Time,* Gryphon, $16. This hundred-page novella is a richly atmospheric cross-pollination of the Baker Street sleuth's return to 1890s London, as described in "The Adventure of the Empty House," and the events of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine.*

*** Dean Koontz: *Velocity,* Bantam, $27 hardcover; $7.99 paperback reprint. In a fresh variation on a familiar situation, the nutty games-playing serial killer's antagonist is not a cop but a Napa Valley bartender. The wild and tricky plotting, hyped-up suspense, moral ponderings, and unconventional romance demonstrate that over-the-top can be a good thing.

** Dean Koontz: *Forever Odd,* Bantam, $27. Koontz's second 2005 book, a sequel to 2004's

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Odd Thomas, about the psychic detective and fry cook whose unwelcome ability to see and communicate with the dead includes a relationship with a displaced Elvis Presley, has its moments but is far from its extraordinary predecessor in originality and emotional impact.

** Kent Conwell: *The Ying On Triad,* Avalon, $21.95. In his fifth case, Austin P.I. Tony Boudreaux has a week to save an innocent man from execution. The publisher's products, directed mainly to a Middle American library market, usually fly under the reviewer radar. While this one presents a broad target—it's simplistic in plot and development, old-fashioned in language and attitudes, unoriginal, and lacking a surprise finish—it is smoothly readable and should please its intended audience.

Those whose interest in mystery fiction extends beyond reading—e.g., to attending conventions, subscribing to fanzines, posting to online discussion groups—will love Marvin Lachman's *The Heirs of Anthony Boucher: A History of Mystery Fandom* (Poisoned Pen, $16.95), which is enjoyably written, scrupulously accurate, and admirably willing to address controversy.

Elizabeth George's long novels about Scotland Yard detectives Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers have been distilled into hour-and-a-half TV adaptations with the excellent acting and production values typical of the British imports seen on PBS's *Mystery. The Inspector Lynley Series 3* (WGBH Boston, $39.95 DVD or VHS) draws compact and diverting whodunits from *A Traitor to Memory, In Pursuit of the Proper Sinner,* and *A Cry for Justice,* but *If Wishes Were Horses* overdoes the series' soap opera elements and has numerous improbabilities leading up to its annoying cliffhanger climax.

ON OUR COVER: When *EQMM* began in 1941 it was with the auspicious pairing of an editor committed to achieving recognition of mystery fiction as literature and an art director who "in all his mystery designs remained closer to the style of high-brow publishing graphics than to pulp fiction" (says Thomas Hansen in *Classic Book Jackets).* We all know who the editor was; the art director was the famous German-born designer George Salter. A refugee from Nazi Germany, Salter, already well-known for the innovative approach he had brought to book jackets in Europe, became a U.S. citizen in 1937. On entering the U.S. he was offered work for S & S and Alfred A. Knopf, and designed covers for the likes of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Thomas Mann. In 1939, he added to these book projects the role of art director for Lawrence Spivak's Mercury Press, and was still on board when Spivak launched *EQMM.* Though Salter had no real liking for mysteries, his covers for this magazine show his characteristic ability to create mood and atmosphere and even to convey psychological states with his illustrations and his innovative use of type. The Salter illustration reproduced this issue is from April 1946. The technique employed, airbrush, was used on most of the *EQMM* covers Salter produced from 1941 through 1957, when he stepped down as art director. Salter differed from all subsequent art directors for *EQMM* in being not only the cover's designer but its artist. Many consider him the most important book designer of the 20th century. He died in 1967.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

A Day at the Beach

by Helen Tucker

The whole stinking mess started as he went out the gate of Rocky River Prison Camp and the guard at the gate looked on his clipboard and read, "Micah Brody, number 46503, paroled after serving three years and four months." The guard looked Brody up and down, gave a little snort, and said, "How was your stay with us, Brody?"

Brody, who thought all guards were slimy scum, gave this one his biggest smile and said, "It was a day at the beach."

That spontaneous sentence was the beginning of the whole damn thing.

The guard opened the gate, still scowling as though he hated to let anyone out, and snarled, "Don't forget to check regularly with your parole officer or you'll be back, heh, heh."

Brody didn't answer, didn't even bother to nod, but walked through the steel gate into bright sunshine and out to the road where his friend Nathan waited in his car to take Brody away from the accommodations from hell.

As Brody got in the car, Nathan sang out, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty you're free at last." He was the custodian and sometime preacher at the Church of the Divine Word and usually he was high—often too high for Brody—on religion. Like he'd

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had a shot of it in his arm or maybe sniffed too much of it.

Brody gave his friend a good looking-over now. Nathan seemed to have aged in the three-plus years. His hair was cut short where it had been shoulder length before and his brown stubble was now a grayish beard. His face was craggy, but his eyes still had that piercing quality, as though he could see inside your head and know every sin you'd ever committed.

He, himself, hadn't changed that much, Brody thought. Maybe gained a few pounds from eating regularly, but his hair was still dark, no gray, his dimples were as deep as ever, and he'd bet he could still wow the women from vertical to horizontal.

Helen Tucker is not known for creating series characters. This time she makes an exception and brings back her anti-hero from the *EQMM* story "The Ice Storm." "Sometimes it's more fun to work with the dumb wicked than the smart righteous," she says. "And I may use Brody again if I can think up another daft scam for him." †

Nathan put his hand on Brody's arm. "How you been, friend? Wasn't too bad in there, was it?"

They hadn't seen each other since the day of sentencing, but Nathan had written about once a month, mostly quoting scripture.

"Bad enough," he said. "What I can't figure is why I had to stay so long. All I did was take a few things from a house on an icy night. They got everything back, every single piece. I got a broken leg on the ice, was in the prison hospital three weeks, then got shipped to that friggin' work camp."

"But you got out early." Nathan, as usual, had to look on the bright side and count everybody's crappy little blessings.

"I served a third of the sentence and got some good time," Brody said, almost belligerently. "I behaved so good, it was like I was you."

Nathan laughed. "Keep it up and you'll keep out of trouble."

He and Nathan had been thick ever since that day some years ago when he had taken Nathan's part against a cop. Nathan had been preaching on a street corner when the cop told him to move along. Brody reminded the cop about freedom of speech, then the cop made them both move along.

Nathan and the goddamn prison system were the only ones in the world who knew Brody's first name was Micah. Even his ex-wife had called him Brody. She was ex because she threw him out when she found out what he did for a living. Threw him out and kept the house.

"I got to have some wheels." He punched the dashboard for emphasis. "What'd you do with my Chevy, Nathan?"

"Used it some for the church. It's there now, full of gas and waiting for you."

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"Good! I'm ready to get it right this minute. There's somewhere I gotta go."

"Where's that?"

"The beach. I got this sudden hankering to see the ocean, smell salt air, and look at undressed women. It hit me just as I came out of that hellhole."

Nathan shook his head, said something that sounded like "Tsk! Tsk!" but, mercifully, didn't offer a sermon on the subject.

Man, it was the greatest! Speed limit 70 mph. I-40 to the shore. He'd checked with his parole officer, told her he was going to the beach (right here in the state) for a week or so, went to the bank and got his $319 out of savings, and took off. He was very careful to stay within the speed limit—which felt like flying anyway—because he didn't want to get a ticket on his first free day. Jee-zuss, wouldn't that be the pits? Get sent back because of a lousy traffic ticket!

The only cloud in his sky right now was lack of the old do-re-mi. As a professional shoplifter, held made a pretty good living, but now he had to think of some other way of fund-raising. During the three years he was "retired," merchants undoubtedly had come up with dozens of new ways to catch store boosters.

Well, something would turn up. It always did.

He turned east at the outskirts of the port city and headed for the ocean, singing loudly, "By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea . . ."

The old Chevy didn't have air conditioning, so he drove with the windows down, and he smelled the salt air long before the ocean came into view. He took a deep breath and made a vow: They'd never put him on the inside again.

First off, he had to find a place to stay. On Ocean Boulevard he stopped at a chain hotel and stood in a trance when the desk clerk told him the cost of a room was $135 a day. Without a word, he went back to his car. If a chain hotel cost that much, the really plush hotels must cost more than he'd made in a lifetime of hoisting merchandise. He kept driving down the street until he was almost at the south end of the beach and then he came to an old frame house, badly in need of paint, that looked as though several hurricanes had stopped there for a spree. In the yard was a sign, GARAGE APT. FOR RENT.

It couldn't possibly cost as much as those hotels, he thought. So he knocked at the door several times before it was opened by a woman of indeterminate old age, seventy or more, who squinted at him over the top of rimless glasses. She had a mole on her chin, out of which grew a long black hair, and this instantly repelled Brody. He could endure moral flaws until the residents of hell were ice skating, but physical flaws turned him off completely.

"Yes?" the woman said when Brody was slow to speak. "You want something?"

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Brody pointed to the sign. "I was wondering . . . How much you charge for the apartment?"

"Forty-five dollars a week, a week in advance, no refund if you leave early."

"Could I see it?"

The garage, in the same condition as the house, sat a few yards away from the house with stairs outside going up to a door. The stairs seemed as rickety as everything else around here, including the woman. She took out a key and opened the door. "My name is Miz Dudley. What's yours?"

"Brody," he said, and held out his hand to shake before she could ask for another name to go with Brody.

What he saw inside was not an apartment, but one room. There was an old sofa, some chairs around a card table, a double bed, a doll sized fridge, a three-burner hot plate, a sink that was brown with age, and inside a curtained-off area, a lavatory in the same condition, and a commode. He'd had better accommodations in prison.

"Don't you think forty-five dollars a week is a bit steep for this?" he asked. "There's not even a shower."

"You agree to stay a month and I'll cut it to forty," she said. "And there's a bath house a block or two away that has showers."

What the hell! He wasn't going to find anything cheaper. "I'll take it." What he had to do was get his hands on some money pronto so he could find something better.

After bringing in his lone suitcase, he found a nearby discount store and bought sheets for the bed, a couple of towels, swim trunks, beer, bread, a sandwich spread, and a cantaloupe, a real delicacy that he hadn't had since before he was canned.

Now he was ready for his day at the beach.

Back in his so-called apartment, he looked in drawers under the sink until he found a knife that would cut the cantaloupe. After eating the whole melon, he put on the swim trunks and headed for the ocean.

When he reached the beach, he simply stood there for a long time looking at the waves, the surf, and taking deep breaths. Damn, this was good! He had forgotten how really great the outside could be. Then his eyes surveyed the sand. It was late in the afternoon and, even with daylight savings time, the sun was beginning to head downward. So there weren't a lot of people sunning now, but still a few. There was a family down near the surf: mother, father, and two little kids. There were two women lying on a blanket half under an umbrella. There were three guys, beer cans in hand, standing in the surf. Not a shapely girl in sight. Oh well, tomorrow was another day. He'd come early and stay late.

He went back to his apartment, made a sandwich, drank a couple of beers, and wished he had bought another cantaloupe. He sank

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down on the bed, which sank when he did, but he was so tired he didn't notice. When he opened his eyes again the morning sun was shining through his one window. He got up, cursed himself for forgetting to buy coffee, had beer and toast for breakfast, and began to think what he could do to get his hands on money, a lot of money.

Just ripping off a few stores wouldn't do it, and he had never had the guts to rob a bank. Breaking and entering some of the beach cottages . . . Hell no, that was what had sent him up in the first place. So what . . . ?

Maybe a walk down the beach would clear his mind, give him some ideas. First, he had to go back to the store and haul in more food. He hadn't been thinking too straight yesterday and had forgotten a lot of things.

When he returned with two bags of groceries, he counted his money. He figured he had enough to last another week, maybe ten days if he didn't eat much. The big surprise was how much food cost now. Where he'd been, he hadn't had to pay for it.

When he got to the beach, a big smile broke out. There were a lot of people, some under umbrellas, some spread out on beach towels, some in the water. His eyes went quickly to the girls in their bikinis. This was what he'd come for. Finally, he had died and gone to heaven!

But right now he had to think about raising money for this celestial holiday. Almost immediately an idea came to him. While people were in the water, their belongings were on the shore. He could lift a few wallets.

He began walking down the beach. There were several beach bags, unguarded, on towels or under umbrellas, but those on towels had people sunning nearby who would notice if he began opening the bags. He did look in a couple under umbrellas, but there was no money, only those little cards used for room keys, and of course, none of them had a room number, so there was no point in taking them.

He walked further down the beach, for the first time beginning to feel depressed. He *had* to have money. He looked more closely at the people, not just the buxom girls, and he was surprised at how many toddlers there were. Babies and little kids everywhere. They were building sand castles, throwing balls, floating on rubber rafts in the surf, and some of the tiniest ones were just crawling in the sand, near mothers who were burning their skins in the sun.

He stopped for a moment, gaping. Some of the mothers were watching their little kids, but some were not. For all they knew, their infants could have crawled out to the surf and been washed out to sea. Where there were fathers around, they seemed to be playing with the kids, but the mothers, some of them . . .

Jee-zuss! If somebody wanted a baby, this would be the place to pick one up. A kidnapping.

A kidnapping if you wanted money.

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But such a thought had never entered his head before. He couldn't imagine taking a child. What would you do with it until ransom was paid? Where would you keep it? How would you go about returning it without getting caught? Nosiree, not in a million years! That wasn't his thing. Stealing was.

But wasn't taking a child nothing but stealing?

He walked along the beach, his mind in an uproar. He needed money desperately. If he just *borrowed* a kid for a little while, say overnight, and returned it unharmed, was that really kidnapping? He could ask for some money for its safe return, and the parents would be grateful to him for keeping the child so well.

No, no, he couldn't do it. It would be too risky. How would he know who the parents were or where they lived? How could he ask them for money if he knew nothing about them?

Easy! If he took a kid today, kept it overnight, the parents' name would be in the morning paper with the story of the missing child. But could he pick up one off the beach without someone noticing and without the kid yelping its little head off?

He walked on and on, past the crowded part of the beach, now along a row of cottages. It was something to think about, but he still couldn't imagine doing it.

And then he could.

There was one woman, youngish, probably early or middle thirties, dyed blond hair, purple bikini hugging a good figure, lying on a large Confederate-flag beach towel. There were no other people near her. Going toward the water at an unsteady gait was a little boy, not much over a year old. The woman appeared to be asleep.

He started to call out to her, to wake her, tell her to look after her son. But then he didn't. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he went to the kid, picked him up, and said, "You shouldn't go to the water like that."

The kid just looked at him. Didn't cry or utter a sound.

Then Brody did it. He started walking back the way he had come, riding the kid peacefully on his shoulders, the kid laughing all the time. He felt a little antsy when people looked at him, but apparently they thought he was a father playing with his kid. Finally, he got back to his garage room and put the kid down on the sofa, really looking at him for the first time. He wasn't bad looking, kinda cute, in fact: brown curly hair, big blue eyes that were staring back at him, and then those eyes filled up, spilled over, and the kid was crying.

"Wah! Wah!" The little face now scrooched up in a frown that was like a thunderhead before a disastrous storm. "Wah! Wah!"

Godamighty, what did you do with a crying kid?

"Shh! Don't cry! Please don't cry. Here, ride on my shoulders again." He picked the baby up and the crying stopped. The kid looked at him in a puzzled way. Then Brody smelled the smell.

Uh-oh! He'd never changed a diaper in his life, didn't know how,

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didn't even want to know how. But he'd have to learn pretty quick. He took off the stinky one, folded together some thick paper towels he'd bought, and used scotch tape he found in a drawer to hold them together. The kid still looked at him in an accusing way, but at least the yelling stopped.

Something else he hadn't thought of was food. A kid that young couldn't eat real food and he couldn't risk going out to buy baby food. He looked at the groceries he bought that morning, picked up a banana and mashed half of it, eating the other half himself. The kid just looked at it. Then Brody realized the baby couldn't feed himself so he got a spoon and shoveled the banana in. Now, the kid looked content, but when Brody put him back on the sofa the *wah-wah*ing started again, and before Brody could shush him there was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Brody, open up. I know you're in there."

And there was Miz Dudley, hands on hips, scowling at him. She looked past him into the room and said, "In case I forgot to tell you, I don't allow children here, no children of any age."

"Uh—this ain't my kid. I'm just keeping him for a day for my sister so she can enjoy the beach."

"Well, you be sure he's out of here by nightfall. Or you can go too and forfeit the rent."

"You can count on it."

She thumped back down the steps and went into the house.

Now what? He had to keep the kid overnight so he could read in the morning paper who his parents were and their address. Right now, the kid was on the sofa, looking fairly peaceful, his eyes slowly closing. But the problem remained: what to feed him the rest of the time, and how to keep him quiet. He ended up mashing mixed vegetables from a can he had bought for himself, and giving him a few spoonfuls of beer, which the kid seemed to like. During the night when he began to cry, Brody walked the floor with him for a while, then put him back on the sofa.

The next quandary was what to do with him while Brody went for the morning paper, but that was solved when he stepped outside at six A.M. and saw the newspaper lying in Miz Dudley's yard. He almost stumbled down the stairs in his eagerness to get it. He'd either put it back before she was up or let her think the delivery boy had missed her today. He looked on the front page, and there was nothing but political and war news. Least of his worries right now. Page two, nothing. And so on through the rest of the paper. Not one screaming word about a missing kid! He couldn't believe it. Didn't anybody care that the kid might have walked into the surf and drowned? Or wandered away? Or been kidnapped? Apparently not.

It was for damn sure he couldn't keep him another day. Miz Dudley would just as soon kick him out as look at him, and he didn't have enough money left to find another place. He had to give some

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thought to what he was going to do now.

The woman on the beach surely had to be the kid's mother. And she undoubtedly was staying in one of the cottages behind where she was sunbathing. Maybe if he found her and returned the kid, saying he'd found him on the beach and had seen him with her yesterday, she'd be so grateful she'd give him a reward. That not only seemed the best way to get rid of the kid but the only way.

He held the baby on his left hip as he went down the steps so Miz Dudley couldn't see him. It was too early in the day for anyone to be sunning on the beach, so he stopped at a McDonald's and got an Egg McMuffin, giving the kid part of the egg. All told, it was a pretty good kid. He only cried when he wanted something or was bothered by something.

Brody walked down the beach slowly, the kid on his shoulders again. By now, the beach was filling up, bright towels and umbrellas and skimpy bathing suits, the men's as skimpy as the women's. Might as well be naked, he thought as he looked at the bulges of both sexes.

When he reached the spot where the kid's mother had been yesterday, he saw he was in luck. He wasn't going to have to go from cottage to cottage looking for her, she was right where she had been, purple bikini and Confederate towel.

"Uh—miss . . ." He didn't know what else to call her.

She looked up at him and then at the kid. Strangely, she did not jump up screaming, "My baby! You've found him!" as he had expected her to do.

"I saw this kid with you yesterday, and today I saw him crawling down the beach quite a ways from here. I brought him back to you."

"That kid?" She looked at Brody indifferently. "Not mine. I never saw him before."

"What?" Brody stared at her, all but speechless. After a minute he said, "I know he's your kid. He was beside you yesterday while you were lying exactly where you are today. I remember noticing both you and the kid."

"I tell you he's NOT mine. Never saw him before in my life."

She was lying. She had to be. The kid had been on the towel with her and then had toddled down toward the water.

"This IS your kid, or a kid you were keeping for somebody. Don't tell me you never saw him before because I saw you with him."

"If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to call the police and charge you with harassment."

Brody looked at her, giving her the severest frown he could muster. "You don't have to do that." He was about to say, "I'll go to the cops myself and tell them you won't take this kid," but he thought better of it. The cops were not his first choice for help in any situation.

What could he do? He could put the kid down beside her and take off. That seemed the only way. So he took the kid off his shoulders

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and the kid puckered up and let out the now familiar "Wah! Wah!"

"You see," the woman said. "He doesn't know me from Adam . . . or Eve." She stood up, put the Confederate flag over her shoulder, and headed for the cottage immediately behind them.

Now what? It was the most numbing experience Brody could remember. He didn't know what to do, what to think. And he was stuck with this bawling baby.

"Okay, up you go." He put the baby back on his shoulders, all the time watching the woman as she went inside the cottage.

He could leave the kid on the cottage porch, but would the woman take him in? Maybe she hadn't planned on a baby and didn't want one and would like to get rid of him. She'd let him crawl back to the water and drown. He couldn't let that happen.

"Well, buster," he said. "I can't think of a thing to do with you but deposit you with the cops. Maybe leave you in front of the station or something. Let them worry about what to do with you."

He went back down the beach and up to the boardwalk. This was a first: He inquired about how to find the police station.

It was a block from the boardwalk, a little brick building that looked squashed between a discount store and a restaurant. Brody hesitated in front of it. He couldn't just put the baby down and take off. There were too many people passing by who would stop, look, and know exactly what he was doing. He'd either have to go somewhere else with the kid or go inside and . . .

Was he out of his freakin' mind, going to the cops? They might think he took the damn kid. Which he had. But he was trying to give it back.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Well, here goes nothing.

He opened the door. There were two rooms, the large one he entered and a smaller one right behind it with the door open. In the large room was a desk where a cop sat with his feet up, and another cop leaning against the side of the desk. Both were laughing, but both all but came to attention when Brody went in.

"Help you?" asked the one sitting, the older one, his feet now on the floor.

"I hope so," Brody said. He noticed they were both looking at the kid on his shoulders. "Yesterday I was walking down the beach and saw this kid playing on a beach towel beside his mother. Today, I found the kid way down the beach, in the surf, about to go even deeper and nobody was around watching him. I picked him up and took him back to where I'd seen him yesterday with his mother and . . . and she claimed she'd never seen the kid before. She refused to take him, so now I don't know what to do with him."

There was a long, long silence as both cops looked at him, one with his mouth agape, the other scratching his bald head. It was obvious to him they didn't believe a word he'd said. That was cops for you!

"It's the God's truth," he declared, saying what Nathan always

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said when trying to convince someone of the seriousness of a matter. "I can take you to the cottage where the mother is."

"What's your name?" This time it was the younger one, the one with glasses and a face that had recently known acne intimately.

Omigod! Wouldn't you know! All he had to do was give them his name, they'd run it through a machine, and he'd be right back at Rocky River Camp for Boys.

"I'm Walter Havington the third." It came trippingly off his tongue as though he were accustomed to saying it.

"Well, Mr. Havington the third, why don't you just take me to the mother of this little tot," the older one said. "Les, take care of things while I'm gone."

So there was Brody, sitting in the back of a cop car, screen between him and the front seat, no door handles on the inside. He should have felt right at home, but all he felt was miserable and uncomfortable. The kid needed changing again and he'd run out of thick paper towels. He could only hope that with a cop along, the woman would take her kid. If he got out of this mess okay, he wouldn't even gripe about not making any money.

He gave instructions for finding the cottage, but he spoke hesitantly, because Walter Havington the third would use good words and not street language. Brody had quit all that school jazz at the end of the seventh grade, preferring money to schooling.

"This is the place," he said near the end of Ocean Boulevard. "And look, there she is, packing her car. She's fixing to leave without the kid!"

The bald cop stopped instantly and pulled in the slatted driveway, blocking the car parked beside the cottage. The blond woman in red sunback dress and sandals was indeed throwing things into an old Buick as fast as she could. Baldy opened the door for Brody and he jumped out, yelling, "Hold on there. You're forgetting something."

"I'll handle this," Baldy said. "Er, miss, is this your child?" He pointed to the baby Brody was holding carefully away from him.

The woman, half inside the backseat, came out slowly, straightened up, and without even looking Brody's way, said, "I told that man earlier I'd never seen that child before. I don't know why he keeps pestering me."

Baldy now looked from the woman to Brody, questioningly. But Brody spotted what she had been putting in the backseat. It looked to him suspiciously like a box of those disposable diapers, something he needed right now for the wet kid. "Where's the baby that goes with those things?" He pointed.

"I'm . ... I'm going to visit my sister who has a baby and I'm taking them to her."

Huh, Brody thought, I already used the one about my sister's kid. She oughta come up with something better.

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Suddenly, the kid, who obviously wanted to be back on Brody's shoulders, held up his arms and yelled, "Wah! Wah!"

Now the cop's attention was on the baby. "Didn't he just say Ma-Ma and hold out his arms to you?"

"He sure did!" Brody was quick to agree. "He wants his mama."

"What's your name?" Baldy asked the woman.

Another hesitation, then, "Eliza Marvin."

"Well, just hold everything, Eliza Marvin. We'll see about that." He went back to the cop car, picked up the radio, and said something into it.

Uh-huh, Brody thought, he's telling the other cop to run the name through that machine, but it's probably not her real name anyhow. Boy howdy! Suppose he'd run my fake name through!

Baldy stuck his head out the window. "You from Beckley, West Virginia?"

There was an almost imperceptible nod from the woman.

Baldy said a few more words in the car, then got out. "Eliza Marvin, you are under arrest for kidnapping."

Jeez! The woman didn't even have sense enough to give a fake name. Dumb broad!

"No, no! I was babysitting." Even under her sunburn, she looked pale. "The McClendons asked me to keep their kid while they were in Europe for a month."

"They've been back from Europe a week and found you and their baby gone. They've been trying to hunt you down. The message went across the country on Amber Alert. Now you come with me. And how come you said that wasn't your child?"

"He isn't my child."

"She told me she'd never seen him before." Brody put in his two *cents' worth.*

She started blubbering. "I had to take him. The man I planned to marry wanted children and I can't have any. I thought if I told him I already had a child by a former marriage . . . Anyway, he said he didn't want somebody else's kid."

"So why didn't you leave him with his folks?" Brody couldn't resist asking.

"They'd already reported him missing. I'd have been arrested."

"Which you are," Baldy said, opening the back door of the cop car. "Get in. We'll hold you until they come from West Virginia to get you." He looked at Brody. "I don't want to put you back there and it's against rules for you to ride beside me."

"I don't mind walking in the least," Brody assured him. "Nosiree, nothing I like better than a walk down the beach. But hooweee! Can you imagine taking somebody else's kid? Worst thing I ever heard of." He handed the kid to the cop. "Maybe you better get that box she put in the backseat of her car. You're gonna need it."

❖ ❖ ❖

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It was late afternoon when he got back to the city. He had slipped out of Miz Dudley's without her seeing him, forfeiting the rest of the week's rent but happy in the thought that she hadn't got the extra five reduction she'd given him when she thought he would stay a month.

He also left the beach without making a nickel, spending his last few dollars on gas to get away.

He found Nathan in the kitchen at the Church of the Divine Word.

"Well," Nathan said. "I thought you'd stay longer."

"Ran out of money. You think I could stay here in the basement where you put up the homeless for a day or two until I can get my hands on a few bucks?"

"I'll even help you find a job."

"That ain't necessary. I'll find one myself. I'm good at that sort of thing."

Nathan shook his head, a sad expression on his face. "Brody, Brody, what am I going to do with you? What am I going to do *about* you?"

"Just let me be," Brody said. "Don't preach me no sermon. I'll be okay." His mind was already busy with plots, schemes, and ripoffs. "You know, Nathan, I learned one thing while I was at the beach."

Nathan looked hopeful. "What was that?"

"A day at the beach ain't always a day at the beach." ●

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 127, No. 5. Whole No. 777, May 2006. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0013-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for combined March/April and September/October double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $43.90 in U.S.A. and possessions, $53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-220-7443 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail *regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery* Queen, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices.
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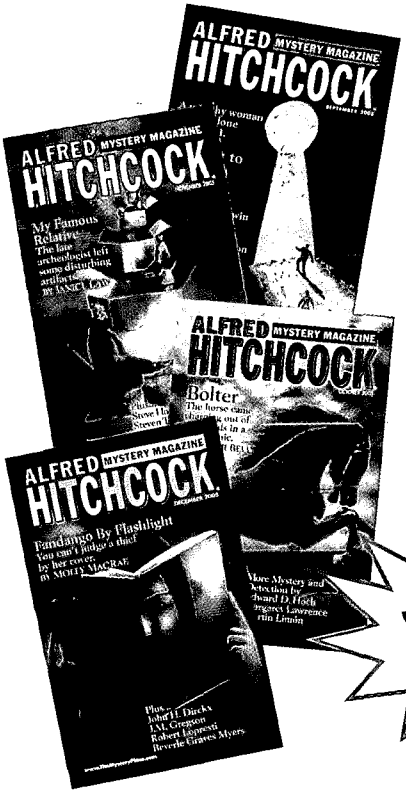

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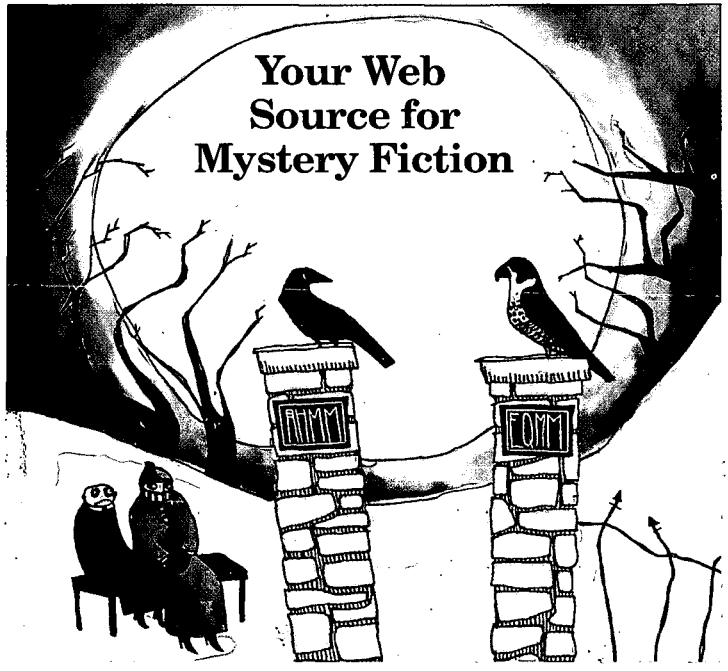

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